Capacity Building and Recruiting: The Resource Effects of Nonprofit Afterschool Care

Introduction

How do public policies shape political engagement among the poor? Studies demonstrate that public assistance recipients are “quiescent” in every form of political activity.¹ Scholars attribute this inactivity to a lack of resources and skills needed to participate in politics,² the development of traits of dependence through receiving welfare,³ and the ways in which public assistance obscures the need for political demand making.⁴ In recent years political scientists have examined the ways in which public policies shape mass political behavior.⁵ Accordingly, public policies can offer resources and incentives for political action⁶ and act as sources of political information and meaning.⁷ Schneider and Ingram elaborate on these “policy feedback” effects, asserting that policies communicate messages and lessons that influence people’s values, attitudes, group identities, orientations to government, and patterns of political participation.⁸ From this perspective, social policies are characterized as agents of political socialization through which clients learn lessons about citizenship, politics, and the government.

As venues of political learning, some policy feedback scholars suggest that public

²ibid
⁵See Campbell 2002; 2003; Mettler 2002; Soss 2001
⁸Schneider, Anne, and Helen Ingram, "Response." American Political Science Review 89 (June 1995), 442.
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Programs can create and reinforce “inequalities in citizen voice,” politically marginalizing the poor. Andrea Campbell expounds on the ways in which the government shapes “patterns of political inequality through the designs of public policies.” She notes that,

Democracy is predicated on equal distances of citizens from government and some citizens’ preferences are much more likely to be expressed in policy than others…But feedback scholarship demonstrates that public programs themselves shape the ability, interest, and opportunities of citizens to participate politically. The structure of policies can undermine or build up recipients’ participation, disadvantaging or advantaging groups beyond their personal characteristics. Government itself shapes patterns of political inequality through the designs of public policies.

Additional scholarship on public programs, shore up this claim by indicating that, after controlling for demographic characteristics, beneficiaries of universal programs have higher levels of political and civic engagement than recipients of means tested programs. These differences are attributed to divergent program designs, which confer different resources and incentives for participation and convey distinct messages about citizenship and political participation. For instance, research demonstrates that the punitive and paternalistic elements of Aid to Dependent Families and Children (AFDC) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) policy design teach clients negative lessons about the government and attenuate external political efficacy and voting among welfare clients. In contrast, universal programs such as Social Security encourage political participation among low-income beneficiaries by

incentivizing political engagement and connecting low-income seniors to targets of political recruitment such as AARP and senior citizens groups.

Further research demonstrates that other social policies have similar positive effects on the political participation of low-income participants. For example, Suzanne Mettler finds that the education benefits offered through the GI Bill enhanced beneficiaries’ socioeconomic status and skills, which fostered capacity and predisposition for civic involvement.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, the impartial application of rules and procedures and the ease of benefit receipt also conferred a sense of dignity to veterans, resulting in increased civic engagement among program participants. Studies show that Head Start has positive interpretive effects on participants through local policy councils that foster political efficacy and civic and political engagement.\textsuperscript{15}

Limitations of Research

Despite the insights of this body of research, the policy feedback literature has two broad limitations. First, its theoretical insights have not been explored in the context of nonprofit social service provision, an integral component of post-welfare reform policy administration.\textsuperscript{16} Since welfare reform, there has been a growing trend toward privatized welfare service provision. From 1993 to 2005, the cash welfare caseload declined from 14.2 million to 4.6 million.\textsuperscript{17} As spending for cash benefits declined, spending on welfare services, such as childcare, transportation assistance, and job-search assistance increased. In 2012, federal and state governments paid a combined $137 billion to nonprofit organizations through nearly 350,000

\textsuperscript{14} Mettler 2002, p. 361-362
\textsuperscript{17} ibid
contracts or grants to 56,000 nonprofit organizations. Human service nonprofit organizations reflected the majority of these grants and contracts with $81 billion funding 30,000 human service nonprofits.\textsuperscript{18} These numbers suggest that a growing number of poor families are currently receiving social services through nonprofit human service organizations. These types of organizations may offer new interactions with the state and teach alternative lessons about citizenship and political processes.

Studies that do examine the implications of this “New American Welfare State” point to the potentially mobilizing effects of private social service provision, suggesting that community based social services foster self-sufficiency,\textsuperscript{19} political advocacy,\textsuperscript{20} and mobilization. Community based social service provision can also build political constituencies for local elected officials and increase political activism among participants.\textsuperscript{21} More research that unpacks the “black box” on nonprofit program design is needed to better understand the implications of this policy trend on political behavior.

The conceptual tools stemming from the policy feedback literature are relevant to public welfare bureaucracies, but may lack contextual range in the nonprofit service context. While public programs are described as paternalistic (punitive and directive), participatory (incorporating clients voice in decision making processes), or bureaucratic (impartial and rule


\textsuperscript{19} Allard, 2009.


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oriented), the nonprofit service sector may yield nuances outside the scope of this concept of
program design. An in-depth examination of nonprofit program design is warranted to further
refine the existing typology or develop new conceptual tools that more accurately reflect the
realities of front-line service provision in nonprofit human service agencies.

In addition to offering a limited understanding of nonprofit social service provision, the
policy feedback literature is less clear on the mechanisms of program design that drive
relationships between program participation and political behavior outcomes. Interpretively, how
do design elements convey messages to clients? How do clients interpret these messages and turn
them into beliefs and, ultimately, political action? In what ways do program attributes equip
clients with resources and skills for political action? Soss and Mettler address these weaknesses
and suggest that identifying mechanisms of feedback effects will advance this body of literature.
The two state that,

Policy feedback can be advanced by isolating the effects of special features of policy
design [...] to understand why policies produce different types of feedback, we need to
identify the underlying dimensions of policy variation that have political significance for
mass publics.23

Furthermore, the two contend that although,

Much can be learned from studies that show how policy actions or features of policy
design, correlate with public responses [...] scholarship on feedback effects must begin to
trace the processes and specify the mechanisms that link public policies to mass
responses.24

Taken together, the policy feedback perspective is in need of further theoretical development to
both advance its relevance in the context "New American Welfare State" and to clarify how

23 Mettler and Soss, 2004, p. 64
24 ibid
specific elements of program design shape political action. This paper begins to meet this call through an in-depth ethnographic case study of a nonprofit administered childcare program. I integrate the insights of the resource, political mobilization, and policy feedback frameworks to demonstrate the potential “resource effects” of nonprofit social service providers.

As elements of civil society, nonprofit social service providers can potentially equip clients for political participation. Like voluntary organizations, nonprofits offer opportunities to organize events, participate in meetings, and discuss politics, all of which cultivate interest and skills for political action.\(^{25}\) Drawing from participant observations and in-depth interviews of clients and staff, I demonstrate how a nonprofit administered afterschool program in inner city Chicago equips low-income parents with "civic skills" and creates opportunities for political participation.

**Brief History and Context: Non-Profit Service Provision**

Charitable organizations have always been integral in providing assistance to the poor.\(^{26}\) However, federal funding in the past few decades has expanded the role of nonprofit organizations in service provision. In particular, the Johnson Administration’s War on Poverty broadened social policy to incorporate a “service based approach” to assist the poor through job training and placement services. The 1962 and 1967 amendments to the Social Security act encouraged states and communities to provide social services that would help public assistance recipients find employment. The Community Mental Health Center Act of 1963 provided support for private agencies and established health centers, while the 1964 Civil Rights Act

\(^{25}\) See Henry Brady et. al “Beyond SES”

Carolyn Barnes established community action agencies in addition to neighborhood health centers. Johnson’s “service based” approach nearly tripled federal expenditures on social services from $8.2 million in 1965 to $2.2 billion in 1970.\(^{27}\)

Eventually, federal provision for social services became more distinct and permanent through the 1975 title XX of the Social Security Act (the Social Services Block Grant), the Community Service Block Grant, and the Community Development Block Grant. The 1973 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and with Medicaid reimbursements also emerged as important sources of support for private health and social service programs.\(^{28}\)

Despite deep cuts in federal funding for social welfare and social service provision in the Reagan and Bush Era, public provisions for foster care services, drug and alcohol treatment, and supportive services for the homeless spurred a proliferation of different types of services offered through nonprofit organizations.\(^{29}\) The greatest push for the privatization of social services coincides with the 1996 Welfare Reform legislation, which established new eligibility stipulations, time limits on the receipt of cash benefits, and work requirements resulting in declining caseloads.\(^{30}\)

As cash-based assistance declined, spending for supportive welfare services increased. From 1997 to 2004, total federal expenditures for cash welfare declined by 50 percent in real

\(^{28}\) ibid
\(^{29}\) Smith and Lipsky 1993, 58-59
\(^{30}\) Allard, 2009
In contrast, federal welfare spending on social services increased from 23 percent in 1997 to 58 percent in 2004. State welfare spending reflects a similar shift; the proportion of state welfare funds for cash based assistance declined from 69 percent in 1997 to 49 percent in 2004. The Charitable Choice provision of welfare reform also expanded nonprofit social service provision through faith-based organizations by allowing churches and synagogues to enter into contracts with states to deliver welfare services without compromising their religious mission. Now community based nonprofits are the primary mechanisms for federally funded service delivery. Essentially, “community based organizations, not welfare checks, provide the bulk of the help offered by the safety net.”

Afterschool Care as a Case of Welfare Privatization

Rising maternal employment rates and concerns about the dangers of unsupervised time for children during afterschool hours led to a marked increase in afterschool program since the mid-1990s. The number of afterschool programs grew from 1.7 million in 1991 to 6.7 million programs in 1997. In 2004, 6 million children were enrolled in afterschool programs and by 2009, the number of school aged children in afterschool programs rose to 8.4 million students. Many of these afterschool programs are administered by local schools, nonprofit community

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31 ibid, p. 27-28
32 ibid, p. 28
34 Allard, 2009
35 ibid, p. 3
37 ibid
based organizations, and for profit daycares. Federal dollars have supported this emergence of afterschool programming through large grants such as 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant and the Federal Childcare Development Fund Block Grant.

21st Century Community Learning Center Grant

The 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant reflects increased support for afterschool programming during the Clinton and Bush administration.39 The program was originally authorized under the Secondary Education Act of 1994 and awarded three-year grants to local school districts to administer afterschool programs. By 1998, funding for 21st CCLC increased to $40 million and in 2002, 1 billion dollars was awarded to 1,520 programs in 6,800 rural and inner city schools.40 Title IV Part B of the No Child Left Behind Act reauthorized the program during the Bush Administration and expanded the amount of funding available to organizations. The reauthorization also shifted the program’s focus to the academic enrichment of low performing schools, as indicated by student performance on state standardized tests in low-income areas. Instead of targeting school districts, the program began to prioritize partnerships between local schools and community organizations such as youth development organizations, community centers, and childcare organizations. The 21st CCLC grant now supports,

The creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic

40 Burdumy, Dynarski, and Deke 2007
States are awarded the grant and then manage statewide competition where grants are given to nonprofits and local education agencies (local schools). The 21st CCLC grant prioritizes partnerships between local schools and community based organizations in addition to other public or private entities. To receive this funding, organizations must develop programs that enhance the education and social benefits for participants; this includes increasing the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state academic standards in reading and math, and decreasing truancy, suspensions, and behavioral problems. The grant encourages the development of programs that offer character education, focused academic assistance for students, and parental involvement opportunities. Nearly 1 million students are currently enrolled in a 21st CCLC funded program. In 2012, the program received 1.13 billion dollars and awarded over 47 million of these dollars to the state of Illinois to support afterschool programs.

Child Care Subsidy

The Child Care Development Fund Block Grant (CCDBG) also supports afterschool programs. CCDGB reflects a welfare reform effort to facilitate the transition from welfare to work by subsidizing childcare for low-income families. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation consolidated earlier federal childcare programs into a single block grant that is distributed to states to implement the program. States can subsidize childcare

44 ibid
for parents that are within 85 percent of the state median income, with a preference for low-income parents. In 2012, 1.5 million children received a subsidy from the federal childcare block grant per month. In the same year, Illinois spent 900 million dollars of combined state and federal funds to support the subsidy program. 40 percent of these funds subsidized school age children, ages 6-12, for before and after school programs.46

Eligibility for the childcare subsidy program is determined by family size and income with income thresholds that are no less than 185% of the federal poverty level for each family size. To qualify, parents must be employed or enrolled in school or a training program and once eligibility is determined, parent co-pays are determined by income and family size. States then allow parents to purchase childcare at a reduced rate from a range of providers that meet state regulations. Providers are reimbursed by the state at a set rate that is determined by the type of care provided.

In Illinois, the program is administered through Child Care Resource and Referral Centers. Families in Cook County apply for the subsidy through Illinois Action for Children, an advocacy nonprofit. This means-tested program has extensive application components and a 6-month redetermination period where recipients must provide paycheck stubs, work schedules, and additional supporting documents to demonstrate eligibility for the program.

Together, 21st Century Community Learning Center funding and the Child Care Subsidy are now key components of the private social safety net. Many nonprofit organizations receive significant support from these federal efforts to subsidized childcare and thus broadly impact low-income families. Consequently, the political implications of these types of programs should

46 DHS Illinois Annual Child Care Report FY2012
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be explored.

Models of Political Participation

Scholars have long explored the determinants of political participation and have largely surmised that individuals choose not to participate “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked.” Accordingly, political scientists have offered several explanatory models for participation. For instance, the rational choice model of posits that individuals calculate the cost and benefits of participating. This voter calculus produces a “paradox of voting,” whereby citizens have minimal incentive to participate because the outcomes of elections will be the same whether they vote or not.

The mobilization model of participation solves the participation paradox posed by the rational voter by incorporating social contexts that structure opportunities for political participation. Political leaders recruit individuals for participation indirectly through social networks and by more direct means via party contacting. Politicians overcome the “rational ignorance” that deters participation by underwriting the costs of gathering information and minimizing the costs of participation through mobilization efforts. They provide information about important issues and subsidize the cost of participation by registering voters and distributing ballots. Political scientists find that SES structures the level and nature of political mobilization. Individuals with high SES are more likely to experience mobilization through

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The Resource Model of participation also draws connections between SES and political activity. Verba and his colleagues\textsuperscript{50} describe political participation as a function of time, money, and the civic skills, interests in politics, and networks of recruitment that mobilizes individuals to become politically engaged. These key predictors of political participation are mediated by institutions (family, schools, employment, church, non-political organizations, etc.), which cultivate psychological engagements, serve as locus of recruitment activities, and help develop organization and communication skills that facilitate political activity.\textsuperscript{51}

The authors find stratification in skill building opportunities and demonstrate that individuals with high levels of education and income are more likely to have the civic skills necessary for political participation. The more affluent and educated are also more psychologically motivated to participate in political activities.\textsuperscript{52} Low-income populations are notably less politically active because they lack the communication and organizational skills for political action. Nonpolitical organizations and voluntary associations can level the playing field for this population by giving opportunities to practice skills, by creating venues to engage in political discussions, and fostering social networks that may lead to recruitment into political activities.

\textbf{Resources for Political Participation}

\textsuperscript{49} ibid
\textsuperscript{51} ibid., p.17
Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s resource model\textsuperscript{53} combines the insights of social stratification theory and economic models of rational choice to identify mechanisms that link socioeconomic status to political activity. They find that SES informs resources (time, money, and civic skills) available for political action. Accordingly, individuals use time to work on campaigns, to write letters to a public official, or to attend a community meeting\textsuperscript{54}. The use of time as a resource varies according to life circumstances where having a full time job, a spouse with a job, having children at home, and preschool children diminishes the amount of free time available for participation. Money, as a resource, can be donated to candidates or political organizations and is concentrated among those who have higher status employment.

Civic skills are described as “those communication and organizational capacities that are so essential to political activity.”\textsuperscript{55} “Citizens who can speak or write well or who are comfortable organizing and taking part in meetings are more likely to be more effective when they get involved in politics.”\textsuperscript{56}. Civic skills are acquired early in life from home environments and through school and can also be developed through nonpolitical organizations such as the workplace, voluntary associations, and churches. Participation in these nonpolitical organizations can increase the propensity of the individual to be a political participant because they give him or her an opportunity for training that can be “transferred to the political realm.”\textsuperscript{57}

“Training” for political participation is accomplished by practicing “skill acts,” activities

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 272.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 271.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 273
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that develop skills relevant to political action. These skill acts include attending a meeting where you are a part of decision making, planning or chairing a meeting, giving a presentation or speech, and letter writing. Verba and his colleagues note that competence derived from practicing skill acts is not synonymous with a subjective feeling of competence, but rather “refers to concrete skills that are germane to participation.”  

Empirical research suggests that civic skill development is stratified as well. The well educated are more likely to gain skills through employment and membership in voluntary associations. However, skill-building opportunities are more widely distributed in the church context, where the affluent are as likely to engage in skill building activities as the less educated. Finally, Verba and his colleagues find that once civic skills are acquired and further developed, they are used in voting and time-based participatory acts.

**Resource Feedback Effects of NPOs**

Policy feedback scholars suggest that public policies can provide resources for political participation. For instance, Mettler and Soss contend that policies can build or undermine civic and political capacity among beneficiaries by creating material incentives for mobilization (beneficiaries may become active on political issues to protect or expand benefits) and by cultivating civic skills within the citizenry through education benefits. Andrea Campbell finds

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59 Henry Brady et. al “Beyond SES,” p. 476.  
60 ibid  
61 See Henry Brady et. al "Beyond SES” and Sidney Verba, et. al. “Race, Ethnicity, and Political Resources: Participation in the United States.”  
62 See Henry Brady et. al "Beyond SES”  
that low-income seniors receiving social security are as likely to vote as higher income seniors in the program.\(^6\) Campbell attributes this relationship to their material stake in receiving social security benefits and their membership in nonpolitical organizations and institutions such as the AARP and senior centers, which are targets of recruitment for political activities. Furthermore, these organizations serve as sources of information and venues of political discussions.

While most political scientists would suggest that low income individuals choose not to participate because “they can’t, the don’t want to, or because nobody asked,” I demonstrate how the “resource effects” of a nonprofit after-school program design diminishes these barriers to participation by equipping parents with the skills needed to participate and structuring opportunities for political participation. For a select group of parents at Progress Youth Development Corp, parental involvement in the afterschool program is a locus of skill development, where parents have the chance to practice skill acts through parent leadership, volunteer, and employment opportunities. Furthermore, Progress facilitates time-based, skill intensive political acts for parents. These participatory acts include meeting and deliberating with elected officials.

**Case Selection**

I recruited nonprofit organizations by attending professional meetings of nonprofit service providers. I scheduled meetings with executive directors from organizations in Chicago, explained my project, and expressed interest in completing my study at their respective organizations. I had follow up meetings with executive directors that expressed interest in

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participating in the study and received verbal consent to conduct the study at Progress Community Development Corp. Progress Youth Development Corp. is a part of the Progress Community Development Corporation, a faith-based organization that offers homeless intervention services, a neighborhood food pantry, and employment services. Table 1.1 lists the types of services offered by Progress Community Development Corporation.

Table 1.1 Progress Community Development Corporation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homeless Intervention</th>
<th>Youth Development</th>
<th>Neighborhood Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crisis response, Transitional housing</td>
<td>Preschool, After School Program (80 students),</td>
<td>Food Distribution, Legal Aid, Housing, Employment,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent housing, Bible Studies, Professional development</td>
<td>Creative Arts and Sciences Programs, Sports and Fitness Program</td>
<td>Financial management, GED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was encouraged by the executive director to attend organization events and to volunteer in the organization’s various programs. I volunteered at Progress Youth Development Corp. for eight months prior receiving formal consent from the director of youth program to conduct the study.

Table 1.2 displays the neighborhood characteristics of Westfield, the neighborhood surrounding Progress Community Development Corp. Westfield is a predominately African American community that has high levels of unemployment, poverty, and crime.

Table 1.2 Westfield Neighborhood Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>20,567</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent African American</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>$13,596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent without High School Diploma</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Below Poverty Line</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

65 Per the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board requirements, I use pseudonyms to refer to the neighborhoods, organizations and individuals involved in the study to strengthen confidentiality and protect the identity of study participants.
Methodology

There are very few studies on the inner workings of nonprofit organizations and the implications of nonprofit program design client program experiences and outcomes. Thus qualitative methods are especially useful for exploring this phenomenon. A qualitative approach offers descriptive information about a dynamic we currently know little about and can be used to develop “theories when partial or inadequate theories exists for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining.”\(^6^6\) I use in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observations to explore client program experiences at an after school program. I received approval for this study from the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board. Parents were recruited through fliers that were sent home with students in the after-school program. To participate in the study, parents must have had their child enrolled in the after school program for at least six months. Parents indicated interest in participating in the study by contacting me in person on site or by phone. I initially aimed to capture a range of experiences that included new program entrants and long-term program participants.

From August of 2012 through March of 2013, I conducted program observations (3:00-6:30 p.m.) five days a week and observed staff meetings and trainings at Progress Youth Development Corp. Semi-structured qualitative parent interviews (n=16) probed parent’s day-to-day program experiences, addressed the nature of their relationships with staff, and included questions about political beliefs and views of their neighborhood. Semi-structured staff interviews (n=7) focused on the organization’s mission, staff daily routines and practices, and the frequency and nature of the staff-parent interactions. For both parents and program staff, interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

I use modified grounded theory to develop broader analytic categories of how elements of program design facilitate skill building opportunities and political participation. My analytic approach is modified in the sense that I was not completely theoretically sensitive to the data. That is, concepts do not emerge from the data independent of my knowledge of the political participation literature. I draw from key concepts found established by existing research to initially organize participant’s program experiences. I began with line-by-line coding of interview responses and when client responses illustrated as concept from the existing literature, I coded their responses accordingly. For example, this client’s description of her program experiences was coded as the “leadership meeting” and “decision making skill,” key concepts in the political participation literature. She states,

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With the advisory group, we kind of like get together and we kind of like talk about some of the things we were talking about earlier like the decisions about the rules and regulations of the parents with the kids’ enrollment.

Her response coded as a “leadership meeting” because the Parent Advisory council has rule making authority within the afterschool program and establishes guidelines on childrens’ enrollment. Her description is also coded as “decision-making,” because she identifies the activities of the group as making decisions on program guidelines. Essentially, attending a leadership meeting categorizes the skill act and “decision making” code further refines what kinds of skills are practiced in the Parent Advisory Council meetings.

Throughout the open coding process, additional themes emerged that are similar to concepts from existing literature. These include themes of “communication skills” and “organizational skills.” However, the organizational conditions that facilitate the development of politically relevant skills and political action are emergent from the data and are not determined by a-priori codes from previous research. These conditions emerged from iterative comparison process of client program experiences. Through axial coding, I clarified the conditions in which skill building and political activity were key themes of client program experiences and instances when these themes were not. For the previous example, I revisited the interview data and probed when and where these skill-building opportunities emerged for clients. I wrote memos on every interview and corresponding field notes. These memos were integrated into broader theoretical memos, which helped refine concepts and relationships between concepts. Analytic categories regarding program design as conditions of skill building and political participation followed.

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Progress Youth Development Corp started 13 years ago as a combined effort of David and Claire Jones and Anne Jenkins, the founder of Progress Community Development Corporation. The youth program began as a set of small and informal Bible studies coupled with an afterschool homework club of 20 students. The program initially aimed to prepare “the next generation of leaders in the Westfield neighborhood.” Now the scope of services provided has expanded significantly to serve over 600 students in its 32-block catchment. The program’s chief focus has evolved to transforming the neighborhood through the next generation. This end is achieved through a comprehensive set of enrichment programs that are facilitated by a network of adults. David, the executive director of the youth program, describes the nature of the youth program as,

A collection of parents, staff, volunteers, and donors working together to create learning environments for the children of Westfield...[through]...holistic services: academic, athletic, artistic, science, life skills, faith development, and technology.

Taken together, these services and positive adult mentoring are designed to,

...invest in the young people of Westfield through... so that they can become the change agents in our neighborhood, where they become the transformers in our neighborhood to where our neighborhood becomes a place where success becomes the norm and families prosper.

Progress has shifted its strategy from short-term individualistic goals to a long-term community wide aim of neighborhood transformation overtime. The objective is to serve a cohort of students that can create a tipping point in the neighborhood—changing its culture to one in which success in the form of high school and college graduation rates, viable employment, and healthy families become the norm for Westfield.
Progress Youth Development Corp. has an operating budget of approximately $600,000 and one-third of this budget ($220,000) is annually allocated to the afterschool program. Forty-five percent of the afterschool program budget is supported by the 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant. The program uses $100,000 of 21st CCLC funds towards afterschool programing, which includes covering the salaries of a select set of employees and a percentage of program expenses. The remaining 55 percent of the program’s budget consists of a mix of private donations and small city grants that cover the costs of hot meals, field trips, and snacks for the students.

**Figure 1.1 Progress After School Program Budget**

As a 21st Century Community Learning Center, Progress is required to partner with a low performing school. Progress partners with Jackson Elementary by giving Jackson elementary students priority enrollment into Progress’s intensive tutoring and literacy program. The afterschool program tracks several academic and behavioral benchmarks to fulfill the grants academic enrichment objectives. First, the program aims to improve student’s reading by one grade level. This is monitored by literacy assessments and students’ progress in a computer
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based reading and math program. The program also monitors improvements in GPA by tracking report card grades over the course of the year. With regards to behavior, the students should show improvement in staff administered behavioral assessments (BESS) and have fewer disciplinary problems in schools. To meet 21st Century Community Learning Center grant requirements, Progress encourages parent involvement through volunteer, employment, and leadership opportunities and through family events like Christmas parties and awards ceremonies.

Parents enroll their children in the afterschool program at no cost. The after school program consists of literacy instruction, tutoring, and homework help. Ninety-five students are divided into five classes by grade level: K-1st, 2nd Grade, 3rd-4th Grade, 5th-6th grade, and 7th-8th grade. Each class is assigned a teacher as well as an advisor, a youth mentor that handles classroom management responsibilities. Once enrolled, students receive 40 minutes of literacy instructions from a small-group reading curriculum and a half hour of one-on-one tutoring and homework help. Students finish the day in the computer lab on Success Maker, a computer program designed to strengthen reading and math skills.

On Mondays and Fridays, the program’s structure changes. Mondays are optional character education days for which staff adapt the "Character Counts" curriculum and integrate biblical themes and scriptures around a particular character trait such as respect, trustworthiness, caring, or kindness. Fridays are dedicated for creative arts and science classes so there is no literacy instruction or homework assistance. Instead, students have additional free playtime and choose from a set of classes ranging from “yoga and art” to “cooking.”

Parent Partnership
Progress program design consists of systematic outreach to parents. To fulfill the “parent partnership” guideline required by their 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant, staff are required to initiate monthly contact with parents. Monthly contacts inform parents of the student’s progress in the program and upcoming program events. Furthermore, the Progress has incorporated parents as a key element of their community transformation mission. For Progress staff, neighborhood transformation involves the success of neighborhood youth, which requires parent involvement in child development and academic enrichment activities. Thus, Progress’s parent partnership entails a high level of parent commitment in the form of parent participation at program events and, in select cases, participation in parent volunteer, employment, and leadership opportunities.

**Resource Deficits Among Progress Parents**

To understand how the after-school program confers resources to parents, it is useful identify resource deficits among the parents at Progress. Table 1.3 summarizes the parent characteristics at Progress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.3 Progress Parent Characteristics (N=16)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Household Income</td>
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<tr>
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Political scientists have emphasized how education mediates the distribution of resources by strengthening interest in politics, cultivating civic skills for participation, and providing monetary resources for participation through access to higher paying employment. On average, the parents in my sample have completed high school but have minimal education attainment beyond a high school diploma. Consequently, they are less likely to have developed the civic skills that are gained through a college education. The low level of education among Progress parents affects their ability to contribute monetary resources to political candidates and issues. The majority of Progress parents have low wage, low skill employment. With large families (4 children on average), an average annual household income of less than $30,000 and the prevalence of public assistance (e.g. food stamps, Medicaid, WIC, Section 8, and other means-tested programs), parents in my sample are unlikely to contribute to electoral campaigns or issue based causes. Time is also scarce among Progress parents as most are employed and have school aged children, key factors that limit the time available to engage in political activity.

Collectively, the characteristics of this subset of parents indicate that they would have lower levels of participation in comparison to other more educated and affluent individuals. In particular, these parents would have minimal opportunities to develop civic skills for political participation given their low levels of education. Furthermore, parents were not exposed to the skill building opportunities offered through church attendance. Church involvement was sporadic and parents that were regular church attenders did not actively serve on committees or participate in church related activities.

In what follows, I demonstrate how the Progress after-school program makes political

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70 ibid
action accessible for this subset of parents that would be, by conventional standards, politically acquiescent. Through parent leadership, volunteering, and employment opportunities, a select group of parents gain “civic competence.” That is, these parents acquire “concrete skills germane to participation.”71 The after-school program fills skill deficits by allowing parents to hone organizational and communication skills needed for political action. Furthermore, the organization also provides opportunities for parents to participate in politics by facilitating connections with elected officials.

I. Skill Act 1: Attending Leadership Meetings

Parent Advisory Council

Progress offers participatory opportunities for the most involved parents. Parents that have developed strong ties with the staff take on responsibilities in day-to-day program activities and become integrated into staff decision-making processes. The Parent Advisory Council (PAC) consists of eight to ten parents. The PAC was created two years ago to incorporate parent feedback into afterschool programming. David explains that, “rather than just having a program that's delivered to kids,” he wanted “[parents] to have a chance to help shape that program.” The council meets once a quarter to discuss a big question posed by Progress’s youth leadership team. The “big question” discourse usually involves developing a new policy ranging from new security procedures to creating disciplinary guidelines for afterschool students. Amanda elaborates on the purpose of the PAC and recent decisions made by the council regarding discipline policy.

We really try to you know just work through some tangible issues that we have in the program and let them brainstorm on how they should be fixed… So the behavior policy

was one of the things the parent committee wanted to change about Progress. And they felt like last year what we did was way too many chances for kids and so um they feel like the Progress program should be an elite program and because of the fact it is such a huge waiting list for kids who want to be in the program, you know there’s no reason that we should be keeping kids that are ruining the culture because of their negative behavior who are ruining that culture there’s no reason we should keep them around um indefinitely because we feel bad or we feel sorry for them or all of that because, inadvertently, it ruins the experience for the other students around them and so um. So yeah it was a change with the parent advisory committee made this year

More broadly the parent advisory council (PAC) shapes the “culture” of the afterschool program.

Lauren, the pre-school director and director of K-2nd afterschool care explains the role of the PAC

The parent advisory board is new within the last few years and their role has developed in the last years but the parent advisory board kind of as it is now um is a space for a committed group of parents to voice what they think the Progress culture should be. Uh whether it’s being maintained um give idea or suggestions for way for Progress to strength their involvement um in the lives of the youth and the community at large. They are apart of um projecting the Progress youth department mission and vision for the future...

Once parents gain entrée to the PAC, they engage in skill acts that further develop competence for political action. As a key deliberative body of the after-school program, parents serving on the council can engage in the skill act of “attending leadership meetings” by participating in quarterly meetings to create policies that govern the after-school program. The council’s recent deliberative efforts were directed at revising the after-school program’s disciplinary policies.

Sheila enrolled her daughter in the after-school program 3 years ago and was asked to serve on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) last year. She describes the typical discussions and responsibilities of the PAC, which includes setting program policies and managing administrative tasks at the program’s “Welcome Center” during program hours,

With the advisory group, we kind of like get together and we kind of like talk about some of the things we were talking about earlier like the decisions about the rules and regulations of the parents with the kids enrollment.
In the recent revision of the disciplinary policies, parents viewed the existing policy as too lax.

Christina, a mother of five and long-time Progress parent, describes the limitations of the previous disciplinary policy and how the program has “tightened up” disciplinary procedures.

Yeah my opinion was they should…. we can use grace but we want to make sure these children know what they need to be doing….So for me as a mother and I’m sometimes kind of strict, there’s things that they should be doing and if they’re not doing them, …. they need to know what the consequences are and they need to be reinforced because that’s what happens in work. I can’t go to work and do whatever I want to do. I have to do what I’m expected to do….I think they might …may have been a little lenient in the past but I think they’ve tightened up on them probably within the last year.

Along with revising the disciplinary policies of the after-school program, the PAC acts as a gatekeeper to the “privilege” of free after-school care. Students who are expelled from the program have the option of returning the following semester, provided that they and their parents meet with the parent advisory council to plead their case, (i.e. demonstrate remorse for poor behavior and the willingness to improve behavior in the future). Parents are encouraged to develop plans with instructors on improving their child’s behavior. The PAC reviews this plan and decides whether the student can return to the program. The following is an excerpt from a council meeting and illustrates the decision-making processes of the PAC and how parents utilize communication and leadership skills in these meetings.

The PAC discusses their recent decisions around expulsion. Lauren and Amanda act as staff liaisons for the PAC, Christina, a Progress parent, reports to the group about recent student expulsions and the prospective return of a select group of students. Lauren begins by acknowledging the leadership authority of the council and her efforts to implement their
Christina then leads the discussion and offers a summary of the council’s actions toward the expelled students. She describes how parents and students were assessed in their efforts to reenter the program.

Well we were looking to see some type of remorse. What they would change, what it meant for them to be at Progress…that was a biggie. We got to hear from the parent, what they were going to do to help their child succeed and move forward. It went really well all things considered. The main thing, the one thing we were looking for was body language and that the child and parent really understood why they were there. We looked at negative body language and whether the child was unresponsive. We were pretty tough. And we know some of the parents, well one, (Brandy is on the council. Her son was up for expulsion and the Parent Advisory Council decided not the allow him to return to the program) this was not an easy thing for any of us…we had to make hard decisions.

She continues, “The two that stayed show the most remorse and understood the depth of what was going on. We had some strict stipulations for them. Once you’re back, no more strikes, red, yellow, green. We’re requiring mom to come in once a month with the child…and she did. Parents should be required to volunteer at least once a month.

Finally, Christina presents the council’s view of the program as a privilege that should be valued by the students. Lauren agrees as the two end the discussion.

Christina comments, “…This is a privilege and kids need to take it…not take advantage of it…” Lauren adds, “They wear Progress out in the neighborhood we want character displayed outside in other places…”
Brandy interrupts, “I have seen a huge difference in the ones who come back… they’re realizing this could be it… and there is one, in particular, who is trying to change… others are trying to pull her back, but she’s definitely trying hard.

Through their involvement with the Parent Advisory council, a select group of parents regularly attend meetings where they are key decision makers. In this case, Parents are setting the criteria for access to the after school program and enforcing behavioral norms for parents and children in the program. Christina and Brandy practice communication and leadership skills by presenting the outcomes of the PAC discipline hearings to the group and communicating their perspectives on the behavioral requirements for continued program participation. Each is practicing skills that are considered instrumental in broader domains of political participation.72

2. Skill Act II: Organizational and Communication Skills

Volunteer Opportunities

In addition to practicing leadership skills through the PAC, some parents also gain political competence through their volunteer work at Progress. Parents typically volunteer by chaperoning field trips, volunteering at community events, and by offering administrative support for the after-school program during program hours. Of my sample of 16 Progress parents, five parents indicated having regular volunteer roles within the program. For some Progress parents, involvement in the after-school program leads to volunteer opportunities in the other areas of the organization. For example, Rebecca is a long-time Progress parent who first enrolled her daughters in the preschool and then after-school program. Rebecca has regularly

volunteered in Progress youth programs and the women’s shelter. Her initial volunteer experiences were primarily in the men’s and women’s shelter. She explains,

When I first started to volunteer I… they put me down at the men’s center at the time they had an employment coordinator, so I assisted him for about a year, volunteering but I was doing interview readiness with the people that came in teaching them how to dress for an interview, helping them with resumes, doing mock interviews with them, looking for work for these people every day. So that was a lot.

Her responsibilities as a volunteer shifted when she began working with women at the women shelter and in the pre-school program. Rebecca received training on the intake system and computer software for the women’s center and has assumed various roles as needed in the shelter. In the preschool program, Rebecca also as a teaching assistant, an occasional field trip chaperone, and a weekly coordinator of food preparation for the pre-school students.

Downstairs with the ladies I really just do whatever. They’ve trained me on the system and they’ve trained me to do whatever the other people that work here do, so its wherever I’m needed. I’m able to jump in and do. I don’t have to ask anyone for instructions or directions. They trust me to just do what I feel like is appropriate at that moment. And again I’ve been asked to assistant teach I guess I can say in the preschool classroom… one teacher she’ll come and ask me to participate and help whatever teachers are left…in…the classroom for the day.

Rebecca says that her volunteer experiences have made her more patient and compassionate and have equipped her with a host of practical skills. With regards to politically relevant skill acts, she learned new clerical and administration skills and how to teach children and adults.

I’ve learned excel, access, and power point. I never felt like learning power point, ever. Which was good because once I started going back to school I needed power point…I’ve learned how to do a proper resume and help other people do resumes. I’ve learned how to instruct people to do different things so if I had to teach anything now I know how to approach that situation to teach different groups of people how to do the same thing. So I can teach the kids how to do something, if I had to go teach the adults how to do something, I know how to switch gears and teach the adults downstairs how to do it.
Furthermore, Rebecca has practiced additional communication and leadership skills by writing letters on behalf of men and women at the shelters and coordinating support groups for the shelter guests.

I used help to again at the men’s center and they used to have a lot of programs where people would come in and help and do a lot of support groups and I would be setting up the times or the setting up for the group and I would actually sit in on the group and assist whoever was doing the presentation.

For Rebecca, Progress’s youth program served as a gateway to other volunteer opportunities within the organization that have given her the chance to practice a new set of skills that are portable to other participatory acts. Rebecca has written letters, organized meetings, all of which are skills considered instrumental to political action.

Employment Opportunities

A small subset of Progress parents become employees of the organization. Four parents in my sample of 16 are Progress employees. Three of these mothers were introduced to the organization first as parents, enrolling their children into the Progress after-school program, then as volunteers in the organization. Volunteering eventually led to employment opportunities. One mother works specifically with the after-school program, while the other three work in other service areas of the organizations as a caseworker in the women's shelter, a program assistant in the day-center for homeless women, and as the coordinator of the Progress food pantry.

For some mothers, these employment opportunities equip them with new skill sets that are relevant to political participation. For instance, Cheryl's work as program assistant in the women's day center has helped her assist people with traumatic experiences and backgrounds. This opportunity equips her with skills and also cultivates interests and efficacy in continuing to
Um, I’ve learned to, because in the work that I do, a lot of people I see are suffering from
some type of trauma. I’ve learned to recognize it and I’ve learned to, how to deal with it.
So, um, yeah. I’ve learned that a lot of, kind of, I guess, people acting out is because of,
they’re been traumatized.

I asked Cheryl if she felt like these skills were relevant in helping her work with people on
community issues and problems. She further emphasizes conflict resolution skills, which she
believes has given her confidence to express her views and offer help in her neighborhood.

Um, I think that I am able to resolve conflict. I think I have a gift for resolving conflict,
because I do it almost every day. Through that, I can, I can talk to anybody. So, I think
that it’s given me confidence to say those things I was afraid to say at first. To know that
I’m really helping. I’m not hurting. I’m helping. I can do it.

In addition to these conflict resolution and confidence, Cheryl has also learned a set of
administrative and leadership skills. She has written thank you letters, supervised volunteers,
organized meetings, led group devotionals, created calendars, and given presentations to her
supervisors. Cheryl says these responsibilities have matured her.

I’ve had so much responsibility. Like, before I actually got this position I never felt quite
like an adult…Man I’m a big ol’ kid. I’m still a child. I felt like a child. It's weird, but I
have to make…I can’t just react off my feelings now. I guess that’s the big difference. I
have to consider what I’m saying and…a lot of times I have to filter what I’m saying. So I
just can’t say, 'I'm grown I can say this.’ That's a child. That’s what children do. They say,
‘I'm grown. I can do whatever I want to do.’ But, so, I now I have to think about things
ahead of time. Consequences, reactions, everything.

Cheryl describes these responsibilities helpful outside of Progress. For instance, she talks at
length about how her new position has improved her communication skills. She “speaks
differently” and tailors her speech and tone to different contexts.

It has been really helpful. I have, in the last year I have become a totally different person.
I speak differently…. I’m from the west side of Chicago. I don't speak proper English, but
I’ve learned to speak appropriately at different times. Like, I can switch it up. Like, that says a lot. I can’t, I can’t just be, ‘I ain’t finna do dat’, you know, when I’m speaking to somebody who could possibly, you know… we can be linked together to do something better. So, I, I guess I’ve learned to, um, be aware of my surroundings and adjust to whatever is going on at that particular time.

Finally, Cheryl believes her position at Progress has made her famous in the community.

Through Progress, Cheryl serves a positive role model for her children and her neighborhood.

She uses her influence to teach her children the importance of helping others and to connect neighborhood residents to the programs offered at the center.

I think it’s useful because now people recognize me when I leave, in the community…I get a chance to show my children that just because these people look a certain way doesn’t mean we’re different. Like, you know, they’re just going through something so we have to help them. It’s our duty. These are our people. This is my community.

She continues,

Now everybody knows that I’m Cheryl from Progress. And so, people are learning what Progress is, and people are coming in they’s like, you know, they come in and get they’re services, and now, you know, their head’s a little bit higher. So, I’m like, ok, I’m famous in the community. Yeah, come on down to Progress. So, everybody knows me and this is amazing. Even on my block.

Taken together, these leadership, volunteer, employment opportunities at Progress have allowed Cheryl and other parents to develop communication skills and organizational skills that can be used in the broader realms of political participation. Parent leaders attend leadership meetings and deliberate on program policies, volunteers develop organizational skills through managing program activities in Progress youth programs and other service areas, and parent employees gain communication and organizational competencies that are useful for political action.

**Parent Involvement as an Avenue to Political Participation**

Interestingly, all of the parents from South End and Progress programs indicated that they voted in the last presidential election. While parents generally regarded voting as basic duty and
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right, most parents attributed their choice to vote to the racial identity of the presidential
candidate. Other time and skill-based acts like protesting, letter writing, and contacting elected
officials were less prevalent and not equally distributed across parents. A subset of parents at
Progress indicated that they had met elected officials through their involvement in the after-
school program. Parents with high levels of parental involvement (i.e. participation on the
advisory council and extensive volunteer work within the program) were selected to meet city
and state elected officials at press conferences, roundtables, and community events. Of the 15
parents interviewed, eight recalled having met an elected official through Progress.

Progress recently facilitated parent connections with elected officials through a Mayoral
round table regarding the Chicago Public School teacher strike. In the fall of 2012, the Chicago
Public School system’s teachers union waged a seven-day strike that affected 350,000 students.

In response to growing public tension around the strike, Mayor Rahm Emmanuel approached the
leaders of Progress about conducting a round table at the organization. The round table would
give parents the opportunity to voice their concerns to the mayor directly. David explains how
the idea emerged,

The mayor's office called us at like eleven o'clock on day two of the teachers strike and
said 'The mayor is wanting to get out and listen to the stories of parents about how the
strike is affecting their families.' So, to which I said, like, we of course would like to have
the mayor here, however, I also don't want three hundred picketers outside our front door
either. We're trying to do our job here. So, we're not the bargaining table for that dispute.
We'll let them worry about whose fault it is that we don't have a contract. But if you're
giving our parents a chance to speak to the mayor, we'll get 'em there, but I don't want
this to be some big press event where it's interpreted to be just a photo op or something
like that.

The Mayor's office agreed, and only permitted one reporter and a camera at the roundtable event.

David instructed his staff to invite working parents in the program to attend. Most of the parents
those who sit on the advisory council and volunteer within the program.

So that's when I went to some of our staff and said, 'Do you think we can pull this off? I can't get all these parents in the room this fast. Are you willing to take a couple of hours today and we come up with our list that we call and get people to come?' They said absolutely. So we did that. We filled the room with parents from our program, in particular we focused on working parents. I was convinced the most, that the parents that were suffering the most from the strike were the parents who were working, because they were now having to come up with alternative arrangements for their children. So that's the group we focused on. And so we got them all to come that night.

David continues to explain the format of the roundtable and the topics of discussion. The mayor sat with roughly 15 parents to hear about how the CPS strike affected their families. Parents were given opportunities to directly share their concerns with the Mayor.

The mayor was supposed to be here for about forty-five minutes. He ended up staying for over two hours listening to their stories [...]And so they, they got a chance to talk about, you know, what their family was like and how the strike impacted it, their family. And so they heard anything from, 'I moved back in with my Dad with my three boys because my dad's health was failing and I wanted to be there for him. As it turned out, as a result of this strike, he's having to be there for me. And he can barely walk, but at noon each day he's getting up and he's driving the boys over here to Progress from noon to six so they can be here and go do school and learn during the strike [...] but that's not what my dad should be doing. He can barely walk, but he's driving them here.' [...]But that's kind of how that happened and by the end of the night the mayor listened to all fifteen stories.

Brandy, a member of the PAC, was in attendance. She shares how she met Mayor Rahm Emmanuel personally through her involvement at Progress and expresses disappointment with the mayor and Chicago politics. Despite her opportunities to directly express her concerns to the mayor, Brandy views his visits to Progress as misleading. The mayor brought “hope” for change, but his tenure in office has been about “pursuing his own agenda.” She shares her perspective,

Rahm Emmanuel wants to come in and he wants to you know put Chicago back on the map but he wants the perception of Chicago to change and um. You know .he's been here several times you know here at Progress and I’ve met him personally and you know
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he gives us this idea of hope that you know, 'We're here for you and the people of the city of Chicago.' He sold us this to… I felt like to encourage us to vote for him and I did. I voted for him and now he's in office and he's running his own agenda. I'm like well, what happened to fixing this and fixing that and what happened to the educational system? It kind of went from, 'I want to hear the people,' to, 'this what I want this is how it's going to be.

Cheryl also met the mayor at the roundtable. She had the opportunity to share her son's challenges as a specials needs student in the Chicago Public School system. Cheryl was able to express her appreciation of Progress and similar organizations in Westfield in addition to her concerns about her community and her desire for better programs.

The mayor came here for a roundtable and he was asking some of the questions that you're asking now. I made it my business to even tell him the story about Ms. Lauren, the Preschool director, and my son and the epilepsy. I was trying to let him know how valuable a program like this is. Like, we need funds for stuff like this. We need to get the kids off the street. Pretty much every parent in that room was saying the same thing. The teachers are on strike. What are you going to do about it? We need more programs like this. My kid needs extra help.

Rebecca describes her experience at the roundtable and reflects on its purpose. She notes that Progress usually keeps her and other parents abreast of issues, policies, and events through weekly newsletters. This included the Mayoral roundtable that was hosted to discuss the CPS strike with affected parents.

Yeah they pretty much try to keep [us] informed on everything. Ms. Lauren, if it's something major, she sends out a weekly folder with the kids she'll put something in there to let us know what's going on and if it's something that's really going to affect everybody. Um during the teacher strike, they invited the mayor here to talk to the parents. And so we had a round table discussion with the mayor. It didn't go anywhere past the table but you know they opened it up so that we had a place where we felt like we had a voice.
According to Rebecca, the Mayor’s visit was symbolic. He “pretended like he was listening, but he really wasn’t.” The parents in attendance never heard anything from the mayor afterwards about the issues addressed during the round table.

Things that we said, they were never addressed again. So we had issues about the strike but we had issues about the school system that he told us that he was going to address and we would be hearing back and we never heard anything back again.

In sum, the Progress after-school program facilitated direct contact with an elected official and offered a venue for deliberation around the issue of public education. While opportunities like the Mayoral Roundtable did not change critical evaluations of the mayor, the event allowed low-income parents to express concerns and policy preferences to a powerful elected official. The opportunities are scarce of for Progress parents and the residents of Westfield, who are often isolated from elected officials and are not the target of political recruitment efforts.

**Conclusion**

In revisiting the dominant rationales behind why people choose not to participate in politics, “*they don’t want to, they can’t, or they haven’t been asked,*” the experiences of a select of group of parents at the Progress after-school program suggests that the organization overcomes these barriers by strengthening capacity for political participation and recruiting parents into political activity.

Political scientists emphasize the role of nonpolitical organizations as training grounds that enhance the skills needed for political action. Parent’s experiences at Progress draw attention to how nonprofit after-school care can similarly equip parents with the skills relevant to political participation through its volunteer, leadership roles, employment opportunities. Through these participatory avenues of parental involvement, Progress offers training on decision-making
processes, organizing people and events, and communication skills.

These findings challenge the prevailing argument that policies targeting low-income populations pacify the poor and counter the prominent description of the devolved and privatized welfare state as paternalistic and punitive. On the contrary, Progress parents are given decision-making power within the after-school program and control access to after-school care. In exercising this power, parents develop politically relevant skills that can be used outside of the program.

While feedback scholars underscore the interpretive messages of participatory programs, namely how these types of programs convey the value of client voice, parents’ experiences at Progress suggest that the consequences of participatory programs extend beyond interpretive messages by introducing individuals to new politically relevant skills and the chance to practice these skills in program contexts.

In addition to conferring civic competence for political participation, I find that participatory elements of design also structure opportunities for political engagement that would otherwise be inaccessible to low-income populations. Simply stated, the after-school program “asks” low-income parents to engage in political activity. One way the program recruits parents into political participation is by facilitating contact with elected officials. Highly involved parents are asked to attend program events where elected officials are present. Interestingly, the political recruitment efforts of Progress mirror the resources effects of Social Security Insurance.

In the same way that Social Security connects low-income seniors to organizations that are targeted by political recruitment efforts, the after-school program positions these low-income parents in organizational settings that are prime political recruitment targets. However, at Progress, the presence of elected officials goes beyond the symbolic political campaign efforts of politicians, the organization structures opportunities for parents to meet elected officials for the purpose of expressing their concerns and policy preferences. Essentially, parents, who are otherwise politically marginalized by large resource deficits and isolated distressed neighborhood contexts, have the ear of people in power.

**Limitations**

Progress represents a unique case of political mobilization in the context of acute resource deficits among parents and within its surrounding neighborhood. However, not all nonprofit organizations garner the attention of powerful elected officials and can foster ties between elected officials and clients. How the social and political capital of the organization makes Progress politically attractive grounds for elected officials warrants further analysis. Nicole Marwell’s study of a network of community-based organizations (CBOs) offers some insight on the political capital of nonprofits. She characterizes a set of nonprofits as “machine politics CBOs” that serve as constituency building organizations, where elected officials gain access to new networks of potential voters by appearing at press conferences and program events. By creating ties with elected officials, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) can enhance their

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75 See Andrea Louise Campbell. "Participatory Reactions to Policy Threats: Senior Citizens and the Defense of Social Security and Medicare." and "Patterns of Senior Citizens."

Marwell suggests that broader political contexts shape that value of NPO clients to elected officials. However, the organizational characteristics beyond governmental contracts that make particular organizations attractive to elected officials remain unclear. Exploratory examinations of the Progress volunteer base suggest that the organization attracts high profile volunteers that leverage their social networks on behalf of Progress. Consequently, the organization gains local attention and develops ties to public officials. A broader analysis of the organization as nested within a set of social networks may help clarify the organization’s political prominence and point to broader organizational characteristics that yield these unique participation opportunities for clients.

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