Participatory Implications of Child Welfare System Contact

Ariel R. White, Marie-Pascale Grimon, Rebecca Goldstein, Kelley Fong*

March 20, 2024

Abstract

Contact with Child Protective Services (CPS), a government entity empowered to remove children from home, is a common experience across the United States and particularly among low-income, Black, and Native American families. Yet political science has had little to say about the implications of this system for political life. We analyze CPS contact and political participation, using administrative data on CPS referrals and voting from a large county in Pennsylvania. We first present descriptive estimates of voting among adults in families with CPS contact, highlighting how low participation in this large fraction of the population matters for the composition of the electorate and overall participation rates. Then, we use the nearly-random assignment of caseworkers to CPS cases to derive estimates of the causal effect of specific types of CPS intervention—having a case opened or a child removed from the home—on registration and voting. Contrary to some expectations derived from the literature on contact with the criminal legal system, we do not find evidence of substantial participatory effects from these specific types of government contact. We consider possible interpretations of these null findings and suggest additional political science research on this vast and often punitive government system.

1 Introduction

Like criminal legal system contact, contact with the child protection system (CPS) is widespread in the United States. About 37% of U.S. children will experience a CPS investigation by age 18 (Kim et al., 2017), comparable to the cumulative risk of arrest by age 24 (Tolliver et al., 2023). Both risks are dramatically unequal by race: Black children face a 53% likelihood of CPS investigation, compared with a 28% risk for white children (Kim et al., 2017), and young Black men

---

*Authors are listed in reverse alphabetical order. We thank the team at Allegheny County DHS, particularly Julia Reuben, Samantha Loaney, and Seth Chizeck, for sharing their ACDHS data expertise. We thank Andrea Campbell, Jake Grumbach, and Naomi Sugie for their insightful feedback on previous drafts, as well as Anna Weissmann and D. Camilla Valerio for research support. All errors are our own.

face a 49% likelihood of arrest by age 23 compared with a 38% risk for young white men (Brame et al., 2014). Both types of state contact can also prompt ongoing and invasive state involvement in one's life: Parents under investigation by CPS can expect multiple home visits, lengthy individual interviews about personal topics, and requests to communicate with childrens' teachers and pediatricians; for some, CPS investigations lead to years-long court proceedings, ongoing state monitoring, and even child removal. Although CPS can be a conduit to social services, parents—especially those drawn more deeply into the system—experience CPS intervention as punitive and controlling (Fong, 2023).

Soss and Weaver (2017) point out that political science has traditionally neglected the political lives of race-class subjugated communities. Following their field-defining piece, a recent wave of research has examined the political impact of criminal legal system contact (Weaver, Prowse and Piston, 2019; Anoll and Israel-Trummel, 2019; Laniyonu, 2019; Lerman and Weaver, 2020), with some scholars identifying politically demobilizing effects of experiences such as police stops and jail (White, 2019; McDonough, Enamorado and Mendelberg, 2022; Ben-Menachem and Morris, 2023). However, although Soss and Weaver also observe that CPS is part of what they call "the state's more controlling 'second face,'" to our knowledge scholars have not yet analyzed the analogous political effects of CPS involvement. As Soss and Weaver point out, a focus on policing and incarceration, which disproportionately affect men, may overlook issues that specifically affect poor women of color, such as CPS intervention.

Measuring the possible effects of CPS contact on political behavior is challenging because the surveys and administrative data that are typically used to measure CPS contact (the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and county-level CPS administrative data) do not typically contain information about the political behavior of parents subject to CPS intervention. In this study, we leverage a unique data set from Allegheny County, Pennsylvania that links data across a variety of human services agencies to other publicly available individual-level information, including the Pennsylvania voter file. These data allow us to analyze the voter registration and turnout patterns of voting-eligible parents or guardians who were subject to CPS investigations in the presidential and midterm elections from 2009 to 2020.

We begin with a descriptive look at voting participation by people who experience CPS contact, which we view as one of the main contributions of this paper. We find substantially lower voter registration and turnout rates for adults subject to CPS referrals. In the 2016 general election, for instance, the turnout rate for CPS-referred adults, even at the lowest level of system contact, was approximately half the county average. Those with CPS referrals are also less connected to formal political parties, as measured by party registration. These patterns are similar among those who experience more intensive system contact, including those with CPS cases open beyond the investigation and those with children removed from home by CPS. Given the scale of CPS contact and its concentration among low-income communities and families of color, these patterns translate into notably lower rates of voter turnout in the county (than would be seen if CPS-involved parents voted at the same rates as other residents) and have potential implications for the ideological composition of the electorate.

Next, we turn to causal estimates of CPS contact on political participation. A key challenge in estimating the effect of CPS contact on political behavior is that families with more CPS contact are adversely selected. Thus, comparing the political participation of families with and without CPS contact would produce an estimate with considerable bias. We address this challenge using an identification strategy developed by Grimon (2023), which addresses the many other differences between families that do and do not encounter CPS. This design, based on nearly-random caseworker assignment, compares how voting changes after assignment to workers more or less likely to recommend a CPS intervention, relative to prior participation. Despite some theoretical expectations that encounters with the "second face" of the state (Soss and Weaver, 2017) are politically demobilizing, we do not find substantial effects of CPS case opening or child removal on either voter registration or voter turnout, either on average or within any theoretically relevant subgroups (gender, race, or age). Because of the large sample size, well-identified causal design, and a variety of robustness checks, we are able to rule out the possibility that this is a noisily estimated null effect; on the contrary, it is a precisely estimated zero effect. We are further able to largely rule out the possibility that the zero average effect is a function of demobilizing effects among some subgroups and mobilizing effects among other subgroups. This finding holds implications for political scientists' understanding of the types of state contact that mobilize or demobilize voters, as well as the theorized mechanisms underlying demobilization effects in other contexts.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of CPS, specifying how various features of the system may align it (or not) with prior theories on the effect of government system involvement on political behavior. Second, we describe our unique data source, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (ACDHS) data warehouse. Third, we analyze this data and present our core findings. Finally, we present the political implications of CPS contact as a fruitful area for future research and highlight CPS as a case that can illuminate broader understandings of how contact with state systems shapes political participation. We suggest that political scientists examining this system attend to whether and how CPS contact differs from criminal legal contact, and/or the ways in which it could constitute a "bundled treatment" that may mix both mobilizing and demobilizing experiences.

2 CPS and Political Life

The U.S. child welfare system investigates the families of over three million children each year following reports of child abuse and/or neglect, defined as a caregiver's act (or failure to act) that results in serious harm or the imminent risk of serious harm to a child (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Anyone can call a hotline to report suspected child abuse or neglect (together referred to as child maltreatment); most reports come from professionals legally mandated to report suspected maltreatment, such as doctors, police officers, and teachers. A government agency—typically a state agency but in some states a county agency—then investigates the allegations. After investigation, the agency may close the case, sometimes referring the family to voluntary services. Alternatively, the agency may decide to open the case for ongoing oversight to monitor parents' participation in services, either while children remain at home or, if the agency deems children unsafe at home, with children removed from home through the authority of the family or juvenile court. Upon taking custody of children, the agency arranges for their care with relative caregivers, with foster families, or in group care settings, until reunification with parents, adoption, or another permanent living arrangement. In some cases, parental rights are permanently terminated, among the most extreme actions a government can take.

Although child protection interventions are widespread and consequential points of contact between governmental authorities and those they govern, political scientists have paid scant attention to the experiences of people interacting with this system. Notably, scholars have examined the political origins of child protection policy (Nelson, 1984; Raz, 2020) as well as the political and policy consequences of highly publicized child welfare scandals seen by the mass public (Gainsborough 2010). For directly impacted individuals and families, Child Protective Services (CPS) contact is also an encounter with the state that may have political implications. As Soss and Weaver (2017) argue, political scientists must attend to the governmental "supervision, interference, and predation" central to political life in race-class subjugated communities.

We seek to extend Soss and Weaver's call to action—for political scientists "to focus greater scholarly attention on the political operations and significance of policing and criminal justice institutions in the United States"—to another critical state institution. More than two decades ago, legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (2002) recognized the political nature of CPS-initiated family disruptions. As with the criminal legal system, contact with the child welfare system represents a massive and stratified state intervention into race-class subjugated communities, one that reflects and reinforces societal power dynamics. Federal, state, and local spending on the child welfare system totals $33 billion annually (Service, 2022). Point-in-time foster care rates for U.S. children, at 563 per 100,000, exceed imprisonment rates for U.S. adults, at 539 per 100,000 (Carson, 2020; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Over the course of childhood, one in three children experiences a CPS investigation (Kim et al., 2017) and one in nineteen is placed in foster care (Yi, Edwards and Wildeman, 2020); in race-class subjugated communities, these rates are even higher (Drake and Pandey, 1996; Fong, 2019; Putnam-Hornstein, Prindle and Rebbe, 2022).

Among Black children, for instance, fully half are subject to a CPS investigation (Kim et al., 2017) and one in eleven is placed in foster care (Yi, Edwards and Wildeman, 2020).

Thus, the child welfare system, like the criminal legal system, primarily intervenes with marginalized groups. Often, these two systems are intervening with the very same families, with Black families especially likely to be entangled in both systems (Berger et al., 2016; Phillips and Dettlaff, 2009; Roberts, 2012). This disproportionate intervention is no accident. As with the criminal legal system, CPS is a central institution of poverty governance and racialized state supervision (Fong, 2023; Woodward, 2021). Societies understandably want to address child maltreatment, but as with crime, ways of doing so often reinforce subjugation and social control. The vast majority of CPS cases allege neglect rather than abuse, a designation encompassing parents' failure to provide adequate supervision, medical care, shelter, food, or clothing. Such so-called failures often result from conditions of racialized poverty, meaning that parents dealing with manifestations of adversity, trauma, and racism face the government's forcible removal of their children or the threat thereof (Fong, 2020; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). Unlike the criminal legal system, it is women who bear the brunt of CPS intervention, as CPS primarily intervenes with mothers (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

Social science scholarship on other state systems of poverty governance can help us conceptualize potential individual-level political consequences of CPS intervention. In recent decades, scholars have examined how various contacts with welfare and criminal legal systems are related to political participation. Analysis of survey data finds that associations between public assistance and political participation vary based on characteristics such as the extent to which programs are designed around paternalism (Bruch, Ferree and Soss, 2010) and the individual's attention to political issues (Sugie and Conner, 2022). With respect to the criminal legal system, analysis of survey data yields mixed findings, with some studies suggesting demobilization following system contact (Weaver and Lerman, 2010) and others suggesting political mobilization (Walker, 2020), depending on the specific experiences and samples considered. Studies with a causal identification strategy have found that criminal legal system contacts ranging from police stops to jail have net negative effects on voting, especially concentrated among Black residents (White, 2019; McDonough, Enamorado and Mendelberg, 2022; Ben-Menachem and Morris, 2023).[1]

However, these well-identified studies struggle to parse the different possible mechanisms through which punitive state contacts could impact voting. The case of CPS aligns with—and diverges from—other state systems in ways that may illuminate broader processes of political participation following system contact. Specifically, CPS brings together components reminiscent of the criminal legal system—intense surveillance and the possibility of coercive intervention—with features of the welfare system such as access to social service programs (though, as noted by Bruch, Ferree and Soss (2010) and others, welfare programs can also include surveillance and coercion). CPS takes an adversarial stance in bringing families to court and forcibly removing children; at the same time, the agency can also connect families with social services they may appreciate (Fong, 2023). What does this combination of program features mean for the political behavior of people who interact with CPS?

Drawing on the literature of policy feedbacks (Campbell, 2002, 2012), scholars have proposed two main ways in which policies may affect political participation (Bruch, Ferree and Soss, 2010; White, 2022). Pierson (1993) groups these mechanisms into "interpretive" and "resource" effects. We take these two types of mechanisms in turn and consider how they might operate in the CPS context. First, scholars suggest an interpretive, often also called a learning or socialization, channel, in which people's everyday interactions with state systems provide them with firsthand lessons about the government—how it operates and how state actors treat people like them—that then affect their inclination to participate in the political process. This conception helps us understand how programs designed around paternalism, rather than those that encourage client participation and voice, may depress political engagement (Bruch, Ferree and Soss, 2010). When people encounter state programs (even welfare programs) oriented around threatening them, supervising them, disciplining them, and dismissing their grievances, they are inclined to withdraw from formal political participation (Soss, 1999; Watson, 2015). The criminal legal system is the quintessential case of a system organized around state control and authority. Those entangled in this system experience a state that treats them with suspicion, as second-class citizens; they learn "that government does not understand or respond to their needs," leaving them alienated from political life (Lerman and Weaver, 2014, 233). In highly policed communities, involuntary police encounters provide residents with detailed knowledge about government practices; residents' everyday experiences of injustice prompt them to "distance themselves from the antidemocratic face of the state" (Weaver, Prowse and Piston, 2020, 1153).

---

[1] Gerber et al. (2017) find null effects of more extensive (felony prison sentence) contact, which may be occurring to people with different baseline levels of participation and/or more prior contact such as stops, arrests, or jail.

Sociological and social work scholarship on CPS shows how CPS shares many of the potentially alienating features of paternalistic welfare systems and punitive criminal legal systems, particularly for parents whose cases progress beyond investigation. Akin to the experiences of those highly exposed to police and prisons, parents with open CPS cases contend with an adversarial state that they see mistreating, disrespecting, and unfairly judging them (Fong, 2020; Merritt, 2021). CPS-impacted parents of color, experiencing state scrutiny related to their racial/ethnic identities, understand this unequal treatment as indicative of their subordinate status in the eyes of governmental authorities. Moreover, CPS represents the epitome of paternalistic state intervention, with state agencies directing all manner of parental behaviors, from parents' daily activities to their romantic partnerships (Fong, 2023; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). Parents with open child welfare cases are tightly managed and supervised by state caseworkers who meet regularly with them to ensure they are fulfilling the requirements of their assigned "service plans." The state doles out rewards and sanctions based on parents' compliance, even as service plans impose a host of onerous obligations on parents (Edwards et al., 2023; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). Based on observations of family court, anthropologist Tina Lee (2016:168) concludes that "parents have very little opportunity to challenge either state interventions in their lives or the allegations in their cases." Like defendants in criminal court (Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2020; Clair, 2020), for many CPS-impacted parents, court is a space of racism and disempowerment rather than a venue for justice. Ongoing CPS intervention is often isolating and discouraging for parents, who see caseworkers working against them and who find even their own attorneys unhelpful (Fong, 2023). Collectively, these experiences give people in highly impacted communities extensive knowledge about CPS, knowledge that—like knowledge about policing—prompts distrust of and disengagement from state systems and adjacent social service providers (Fong, 2020, 2023). Prior work suggests that these learning experiences would reduce participation in formal electoral politics (Lerman and Weaver, 2014; Soss, 1999; Weaver, Prowse and Piston, 2020; Watson, 2015).[2] On the other hand, some scholars have argued that this same type of political learning mechanism may mobilize political participation, particularly for those members of racial minority groups who have a politicized group identity (Garcia-Rios et al., 2023). These scholars argue that " a politicized group identity is an important fault line in determining whether authoritarian policies assist or attenuate participation," and find using survey data that "for those with a politicized group identity, institutional contact" – including child welfare system contact–"is associated with higher odds of participation."

Second, scholars suggest a resource pathway by which system involvement may impact political participation. For instance, public assistance provides economic resources that may alleviate some material hardship and facilitate political engagement. Conversely, a wealth of research traces the negative collateral consequences of incarceration and other forms of criminal legal system involvement. Incarceration or conviction may legally preclude voting, whether because people are incarcerated on election day or because policies in some states prohibit voting among those with felony convictions. Even for those who remain eligible, disenfranchisement policies may stoke misinformation or confusion among system-impacted people. System involvement may also shift people's material resources in ways that, in turn, affect political participation. After incarceration, for instance, securing employment and housing becomes more difficult, in part due to discrimination based on criminal records; formerly incarcerated people may lose access to public benefits as well (Pager, Bonikowski and Western, 2009; White, 2022). The ensuing hardship may impede political participation, as people must direct their time and attention to meeting their own day-to-day material needs. Notably, this resource channel seems less salient for lower-level criminal legal system contacts, such as police stops.

---

[2] Although we focus here on interpretive effects on voter registration and turnout, CPS's interpretive effects may shape other aspects of political life. For instance, Soss (1999) finds that welfare recipients express greater confidence in their own political capacities, perhaps due to their experience navigating a complex and demanding government bureaucracy.

Although prior work identifies features that align CPS with welfare and criminal legal systems with respect to political learning, the parallels with respect to a resource mechanism are less clear. The incapacitation and disenfranchisement barriers to political participation do not apply in the CPS case. It also seems unlikely that discrimination based on CPS involvement is occurring at a wide scale.[3] Existing research suggests potentially varied or countervailing resource effects of CPS. In recent years, U.S. child welfare policy and practice have embraced CPS as a vehicle for service provision (Berrick, 2011). Assignment to CPS caseworkers inclined to initiate more intensive CPS involvement increases mothers' enrollment in mental health and substance use services in the short-run (Grimon, 2023), and there is some evidence that improved mental health is associated with greater political engagement (Ojeda, 2015; Burden et al., 2017). By supporting parents in addressing their needs, greater social service take-up could ultimately facilitate political participation; alternatively, increased service use could reflect an increased need for treatment due to the trauma of CPS involvement. These services may also be time-consuming and burdensome in ways that hinder political participation (Edwards et al., 2023). Regarding economic resources, when parents lose custody of children, they may become ineligible for certain public benefits. Indeed, mothers assigned to CPS caseworkers more likely to remove children are less likely to receive cash assistance benefits in the short and longer-term and less likely to receive housing assistance in the longer-term. Nevertheless, these impacts do not correspond to shifts in earnings or employment (Grimon, 2023). In a descriptive analysis of primary caregivers' income before and after a child's foster care placement, Hook et al. (2016) identify multiple income trajectories that suggest countervailing processes: While approximately 17% of the sample was employed or receiving cash benefits before foster care placement and then lost these employment and welfare connections following placement, 13% had high levels of economic disconnection prior to placement and became more connected to the labor market and welfare system after placement.

Prior theory and research thus suggest that with respect to the political learning mechanism, we would expect more intensive CPS contact to reduce political participation in the form of voter registration and turnout. With respect to the resource mechanism, theoretical expectations are mixed. To date, no study to our knowledge has examined the relationship between CPS involvement and voting, either descriptively or with a strategy to identify potential causal effects. Analyzing the impact of CPS involvement not only brings an understudied state system into scholarship on political life, but may offer insight into broader questions about the determinants of political participation in the wake of government contact.

---

[3] However, employers in fields such as childcare and healthcare do consult child maltreatment registries, potentially cutting CPS-impacted people off from a key sector of the labor market (Henry and Lens, 2021).

3 Data

We use data on referrals to CPS between 2009-2018 collected from the Allegheny County Data Warehouse (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2021). Allegheny County's Department of Human Services maintains a database of nearly everyone who encounters local government via a variety of touchpoints, such as enrollment in the local schools, paying parking tickets, or receiving certain types of public benefits, and merges those records together across agencies.[4] This cross-agency merge process allows for the creation of datasets that incorporate multiple forms of government contact to provide a wide-ranging picture of people's experiences with government. It also provides coverage of nearly everyone who had contact with a particular agency, without the common challenges of survey sampling and non-response bias.

We use a dataset of referrals to CPS from May 2009 to December 2018, including calls from all sources. We have access to all reports for child neglect for the entire time period, and all reports for child abuse (a quarter of calls in any given year) starting in 2017.[5] These records include nearly all families with any form of CPS contact (and all families since 2017), and they also include cases "screened out" without any action being taken by CPS. Over this period, CPS received over one hundred thousand calls naming over twice as many individuals. (Individuals named in CPS referrals extend beyond those alleged to have perpetrated maltreatment; for instance, if CPS has their information, all parents of children subject to the referral are named in the referral, even if they were not involved in the incident precipitating the call.) Because of our focus on political participation, we restrict this dataset to focus on calls where an adult in the household could have been observed registering and voting in Pennsylvania during the period covered by our voting records, omitting children and adults too young for us to observe these political outcomes. This step, along with several smaller sample restrictions described in Appendix Table A1, leave us with a sample of nearly 2.5 million year-specific individual observations, for over 91,000 unique individuals.

---

[4] Information for how to request data access can be found on the webpage of Allegheny County Data Analytics.

[5] Reports for child abuse prior to 2017 are partly or fully expunged due to legal requirements.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics about the people included in this sample. Consistent with national data (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021), about half of referrals in Allegheny County are investigated, a small minority lead to child removal in the period following the referral, most referrals allege child neglect (rather than child abuse), and Black families are disproportionately referred to CPS. Women comprise approximately half of the sample, though we expect that they are most highly exposed to CPS given that women are more likely to be the focus of CPS's intervention as alleged perpetrators (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021) and as primary caretakers of children (Fong, 2023). For this reason, we analyze subgroups based on gender and on alleged perpetrator status in the SI.

To learn about the political participation of adults in these cases, we rely on snapshots of voter registration and turnout data from Pennsylvania's Secretary of State. To join these records to the CPS calls dataset, we rely on record linkage done by the ACDHS data warehouse. After initial pre-processing of voter file data to remove invalid or missing records, voting records are matched to existing observations in the data warehouse using first name, last name, and date of birth. Exact name/DOB matches are prioritized, followed by those with "soundex" matches on name, and duplicate matches where a voter matches to multiple client records have ties broken by the number of systems the client record appears in (the record with more DHS program observations takes precedence). More details on this matching approach, including a series of permutation tests and other means of validating the merge to estimate false positive and negative match rates, appear in

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Referred Families

Panel A: Child Welfare Referrals	
Investigated (%)	49
Opened a Child Welfare Case (%)	20
Child Removed within 3 months (%)	6
Number of Referrals per Parent	2.5
Number of Referrals	96589
Panel B: Most Frequent Allegations Listed on Referrals	
Parent Struggling (%)	31
Parent Drug Abuse (%)	16
Failure to Protect Child (%)	18
Physical Abuse (%)	15
Panel C: Individual Characteristics	
Age	36.5
Black American (%)	40
Race Missing (%)	12
Women (%)	48
Ever Registered (%)	76
Ever Voted (%)	55
Observations	228701

Notes: Unless noted as a percentage or number of observations, this table reports means. Panels A and B include all referrals made to child welfare from May 2009 to December 2018 which are in our sample. Panel B is a subset of the abuse/neglect allegations that a reporter select as the reason of his/her call. Panel C includes all individuals referred to CPS in our sample. Individuals referred multiple times will be included once for each referral.

Chizeck et al. (2023, SI pg. A11).

This process leaves us with a dataset combining nearly the full universe of voting-eligible individuals who experienced CPS calls over multiple years, along with information on their political participation. As shown in Table 1, 76% of adults in this dataset were registered to vote in Pennsylvania at some point from 2012 to 2022, and over half voted at some point in 2009-2020. Again, this dataset includes all referrals, regardless of whether CPS ultimately decided to investigate the allegations, open a formal case, or pursue removal of a child from the home.

This combination of records allows us to undertake several analyses of political participation among these families that have not previously been possible. We begin with a simple descriptive look at voting among this group relative to other residents of Allegheny County. This analysis does not seek to measure causal effects of CPS contact, as families with CPS calls may differ from other residents along many dimensions that could matter for political participation. Instead, we simply seek to describe what rates of registration and voting look like among a set of people having a particularly invasive set of interactions with government, and to see whether this group is underrepresented in the electorate relative to their share of the population. Then, we turn to measure the causal effects of specific types of CPS contact—case opening and child removal—on adults' political participation.

4 Analysis

4.1 Descriptive Patterns

We begin by describing electoral participation among adults in families with CPS referrals and comparing it to the rest of Allegheny County. This approach does not carry a causal interpretation: that is, we do not imagine that all differences between these families and other county residents are due to CPS referrals. Families with CPS contact are disproportionately drawn from race-class subjugated communities (Fong, 2019), and may have other past life experiences or material circumstances that make them unlikely to vote. We seek here to describe their participation in order to consider how their voices may or may not be heard as part of the broader electorate, in ways that could matter for legislative representation and policymaking.

Table 2 presents summary statistics of 2016 registration and voting among adults in the CPS-contact sample described above. We focus on 2016 participation because it falls squarely within the period for which we have CPS records, allowing us to observe participation in a high-salience presidential election that is relatively close in time to the CPS referrals experienced by these families (thus ensuring that we are examining participation among people who largely still live in

Allegheny County). The table focuses on individuals, not reports, such that people with multiple referrals over our observed time period are only counted once when measuring voting participation.

Table 2: 2016 Political Participation of CPS Families

	(1) CPS Individuals	(2) All Allegheny
Registered	0.62	0.96
Registered as Republican	0.11	0.27
Registered as Democrat	0.42	0.56
Voted	0.34	0.68
Observations	91752	961595

Notes: The first column reports 2016 registration and voting behavior of individuals referred to CPS in our time period, with one observation per individual regardless of the number of referrals. The second column provides the comparison for all of Allegheny county.

Nearly two-thirds of adults in the CPS-referrals sample were registered to vote as of 2016, and only about one in three (34%) actually voted in the general election that year.[6] Adults with CPS referrals are not completely disconnected from political participation—more than half have voted at some point, and three-quarters have ever been registered, across the entire sample (Panel C of Table 1)—but these are still substantially lower registration and turnout rates than the national, state, and county averages for a given presidential election year. In Allegheny County overall, over two-thirds of voting-eligible residents turned out in 2016.[7] While we note that the calculated registration rate of 96% for all county residents is likely an overestimate due to outdated or duplicate registration records remaining on the file after people move or expire, the turnout rate reflects actual votes cast (Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2010). Furthermore, a two-thirds registration rate among CPS-referred adults is likely much lower than the general rate, even if that true rate is lower than

---

[6] We see equivalent patterns of underrepresentation even if focusing on families with CPS referrals falling in the year 2016 only, to ensure that the patterns we see are not being driven by CPS-involved families being more likely to move out of state (and thus not be visible in the Pennsylvania voter file) than other county residents.

[7] We calculate county-level turnout by dividing the total number of 2016 presidential votes cast (reported by the Pennsylvania Secretary of State) by the Census Bureau's estimate of the Citizen Voting-Age Population (CVAP) count of eligible voters in the county (5-year estimates from the American Community Survey): 650114/961595 = .68. Similarly, we calculate county registration rates by dividing the number of registered voters in the county as of the 2016 election (reported by PA SOS) by the county CVAP estimate: 924631/961595 = .96.

96%.

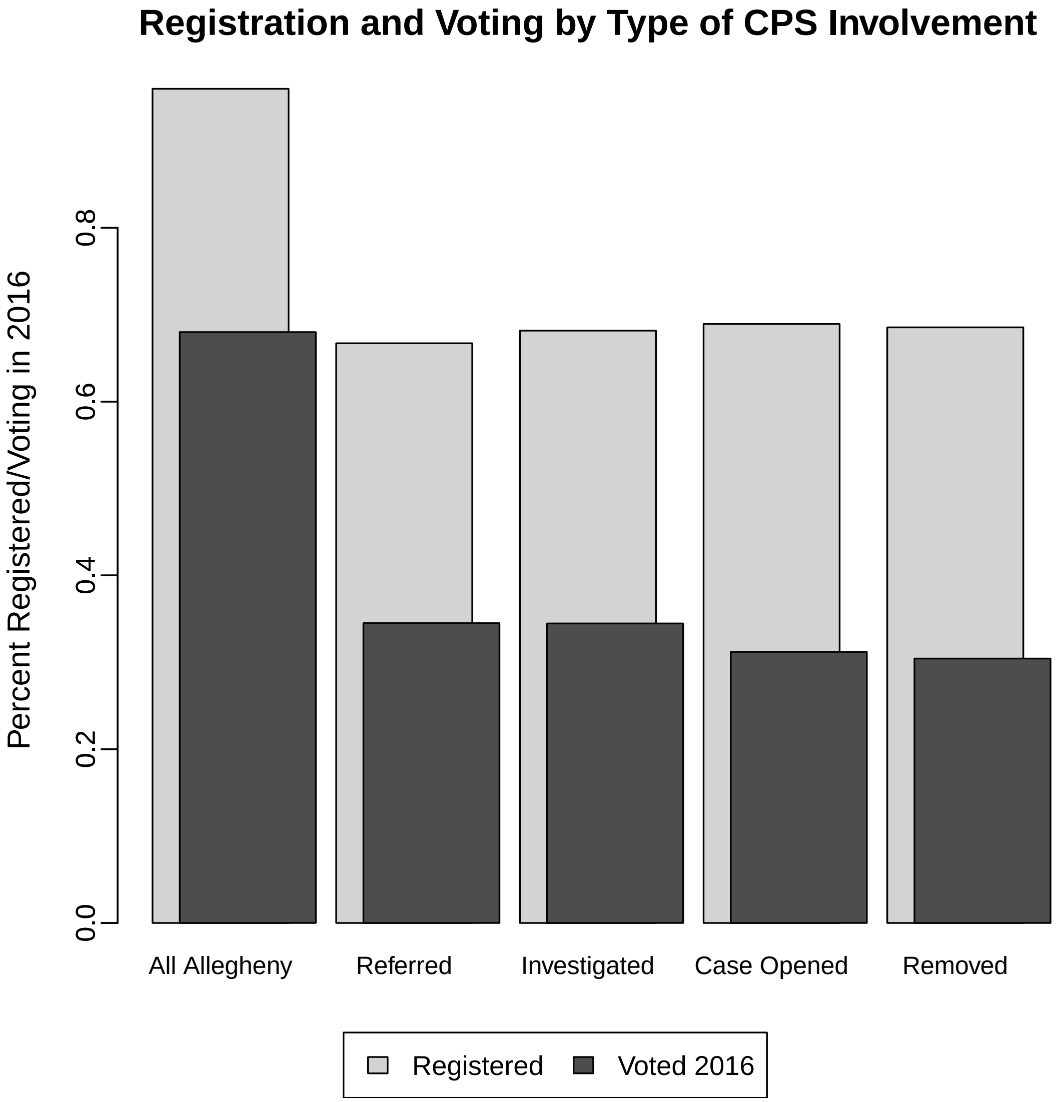


Figure 1: Political Participation in 2016 by Type of CPS Involvement. Adults listed on referrals in our sample may be (1) simply referred with no investigation, (2) referred and investigated but with no further CPS involvement, (3) investigated with a case opened, or (4) have a case opening with a child removal.

Adults in families with CPS contact were also less likely to register with a political party: a total of 53% of this group (unconditional on registration) were registered Republicans or Democrats, compared to 83% of county residents. (Individuals not registered as Republicans or Democrats can be registered with a non-mainstream party, or most commonly with no party.) These patterns suggest that families with CPS referrals have less connection to formal electoral politics than their neighbors. This phenomenon is not limited to people with extensive CPS contact: Figure 1 breaks out the sample into subgroups with various forms of CPS contact and finds similarly low rates of registration and turnout among those with CPS contact across the board, whether considering people with only a call and no investigation, or those with a child removed from the household. Light gray bars show the registration rates for each group, while the darker shading within those bars shows 2016 voter turnout rates. The leftmost bar plots the equivalent values for the county as a whole, illustrating the relative underrepresentation of CPS-involved families within the broader electorate.

We view these descriptive patterns as politically meaningful and one of the key contributions of this paper. Given the scale of adult exposure to CPS referrals in the county (close to one in ten adults in the county over the period we study), the vastly lower rates of participation among CPS-referred adults translate into visibly lower rates of county participation than we would expect to see if CPS-involved families participated at the same rates as others in the county. A simple back-of-the-envelope calculation illustrates this point: if adults with CPS referrals had voted in the 2016 election at the same rates as other county residents, we would have seen over 31,000 additional votes cast in the county, or nearly a 5% increase in total votes cast county-wide.[8] This is a substantial counterfactual increase in turnout, comparable to some of the largest "get-out-the-vote" effects observed in the mobilization literature.

---

[8] The calculation here is 91752 affected individuals, with turnout increasing from .34 to .68, so 91752*.34 = 31,195.

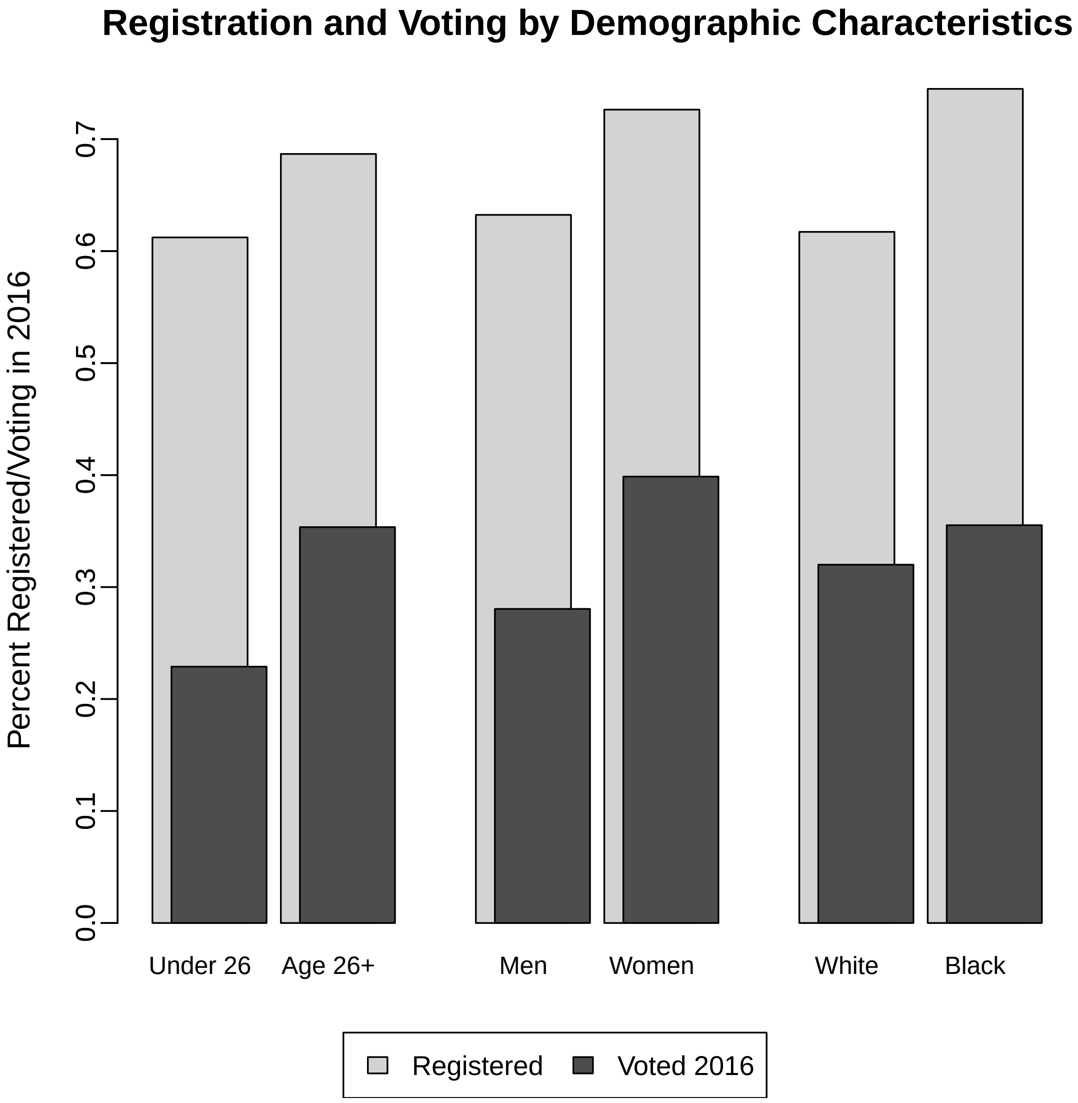


Figure 2: Political Participation in 2016 by Demographic Characteristics (Adults in CPS-involved Families)

Further, these missing voters are demographically different from the county's electorate as a whole. Figure 2 breaks out the CPS-involved population by various personal characteristics and again displays their registration and voting rates. Within the set of CPS-involved families, we see limited variation in participation. Both white and Black adults in CPS-involved families vote at relatively low rates, and though older people in the sample vote more than younger (under age 26) ones, for no subgroup did 2016 voter participation exceed 40%. Given the overrepresentation of Black and young residents in the CPS-contacted group (as shown in Table 1), the low overall participation rates of CPS-involved families translates into an electorate that is older and whiter than it would be if these families voted at rates comparable to the rest of the county. For example, if all CPS-involved families voted at the same rate as we see in the county as a whole (68% in 2016), the 2016 general election would have seen over 10,000 additional Black voters go to the polls along with nearly 20,000 voters from other groups.[9] These additional voters would have shifted the county's electorate from less than 13% Black to about 14% Black. That such a shift would be visible in overall voting statistics for the county underscores both how broad the reach of the CPS system is and how large the participatory gaps facing this group are. As we discuss further below, the demographics of these missing voters indicate that they likely hold different policy preferences than the average voter in the county, suggesting that their absence from the electorate could matter for politicians' incentives.

4.2 Causal Effects of CPS Contact

Because the association between CPS involvement and voting is very likely confounded—with CPS-involved families differing in important ways even from demographically similar families without CPS involvement—we next measure the causal effect of specific types of family contact with CPS on political participation. We do so using a design that combines random-judge-assignment study methods with event-study approaches. This design relies on variation in how otherwise-similar cases are handled by different caseworkers once they are "screened in" for further CPS investigation.

Briefly, all CPS referrals in Allegheny County go through a central screening office, where staff determine whether a call warrants any further investigation. If further investigation is deemed necessary, a caseworker called an "investigator" is assigned to the referral.[10] This investigator visits the family and decides whether a CPS case should be opened, and may also recommend that a child be removed from the household (Grimon, 2023). In 20% of cases called in, Allegheny County's CPS agency will decide to open a case (Panel A of Table 1). Cases are opened to monitor the situation, to provide services to household members, and/or—in the most severe circumstances—to remove a child. Only 6% of households will have a child removed within three months of the call, and removed children can be placed with kin, in a foster home, in juvenile detention homes (for calls involving both CPS and the Juvenile Prevention Office), and in group homes. Key to our design is that individual investigators differ in how often they recommend that a case be opened or a child be removed, even when faced with similar household situations.

---

[9] For this calculation, we use the most conservative possible coding of race, counting only people who are listed as Black in the county records and assuming everyone with missing values for race are not Black. We describe this calculation in more detail in SI Section A.4.

[10] The assignment is typically done based on a quasi-random rotation system within the appropriate regional CPS office. However, supervisors commonly make exceptions to this rule such as taking into account caseloads, travel

This variation in case handling is important because some other common approaches to causal inference are not appropriate to measuring the effects of CPS contact. As noted above, we cannot simply compare families with and without CPS referrals, since these families differ on many politically-important background characteristics. Similarly, we cannot compare families with CPS contact to their own prior history of political involvement (a "before-after" or "event study" approach), because CPS referrals often occur at moments of extreme crisis for families. If adults become less likely to vote after a CPS referral, that shift could be due to the CPS contact itself, or it could be due to the family events (domestic violence, substance use, job loss, or another crisis) that prompted the CPS referral. Thus, we cannot rely simply on cross-sectional or over-time comparisons to learn about the effects of CPS contact. Instead, we look at how the trajectories of families who face different CPS treatment, due to their caseworker assignment, diverge over time. This variation in case handling by different caseworkers lets us separate out the effect of CPS contact itself from the events that precipitated the contact.

4.2.1 Combining event-study and caseworker-assignment designs

Our approach, following Grimon (2023), combines the intuition of an event-study design and that of "tendency approaches" such as random-judge-assignment studies (Mueller-Smith, 2015; White,

---

distances or language.

2019). Essentially, we assume that adults whose cases are assigned to different investigators (those more or less prone to open a case or recommend removal) would have evolved on parallel trends had they not received different interventions recommended by their investigators. Adult household members can have different baseline political participation. Had they been assigned to the same investigator though, their political participation should have responded equally over time to factors such as electoral salience or competitiveness. We test for this assumption in Appendix Table A2 and show that these adults were indeed responding equally to external factors prior to their referral to child welfare.

Relying on this assumption of parallel trends in political participation, for outcome Y observed in year t of adult i listed on an investigated referral r that is referred in year y_r, and assigned to investigator j, we estimate:

$$Y_{i,r,j,t} = c + \sum_{d=-k}^{m} \theta_d \mathbb{1}_{(t=y_r+d)} + \sum_{d=0}^{m} \phi_d \mathbb{1}_{(t=y_r+d)} \cdot TO^*_{r,j} + \mu_{i,r} + \lambda_y + \epsilon_{i,r,j,t} \tag{1}$$

where our parameters of interest are the ϕ_d's which we plot in graphical format. ϕ_d estimates the effect of being assigned to an investigator with a tendency to open a case $TO^*_{r,j}$. Across investigators, there is substantial variation in the tendency to open a case and to remove a child, as shown in Appendix Figure A1.[11] For example, being assigned to an investigator with a tendency to open a case $TO^*_{r,j}$ of 0.1–someone 10 percentage points more likely to open a case than the average caseworker–increases Y d years after the referral by $0.1\phi_d$. Conversely, being assigned to an investigator 10 percentage points less likely to open a case than average decreases Y by $-0.1\phi_d$. The θ_d's are event study dummy variables, to account for the fact that families being investigated may be on different trends prior to the referral relative to families who were simply reported. In Appendix Tables A3 and A4, we also provide estimates of a simplified specification which pools all years before and after (ϕ_{after}). We include year fixed effects (λ_y) to control for time trends and election-year specific shocks. We do not include the main effect for the tendency variable because we include individual-referral fixed effects $\mu_{i,r}$ which are referral-specific since parents can be listed on a child welfare referral more than once in 2009-2018. The individual-referral fixed effects control for the fact that the baseline turnout and registration rates may be different for individuals over time across multiple referrals. Following recommendations from Chyn, Frandsen and Leslie (2024), we cluster at the individual level.

---

[11] The tendency to open and to remove are constructed using the standard procedure counting the number of referrals that lead to a case opening or child removal among all the referrals investigated by this investigator, excluding your own. The star indicates that they are then residualized on regional office-year fixed effects to only use variation in potential investigators to which a family could have been assigned given the family's location and year when referred. Appendix Figure A1 shows variation in tendency measures across investigators after residualizing.

We present reduced form estimates throughout as there is no methodological literature on how to estimate confidence intervals for Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) in our setting. The first stage estimates are presented in Column 1 of Appendix Table A3 and can be used by the reader to get a sense of the IV point estimates in combination with the reduced form estimates presented in Columns 2 and 3 of Appendix Table A3.

We use this approach to learn about the effects of two types of contact with CPS: case opening and child removal from the home. We cannot learn about earlier stages of CPS contact (referral or any investigation) via this design, because these steps are not based on assignment to caseworkers: caseworkers are assigned to a case only after a family has been referred and "screened in" for further investigation, as occurs in approximately half of the referrals we observe in our data. So when we estimate the effect of being assigned to a caseworker with a high case-opening rate, we are comparing otherwise-similar families who have been referred to CPS and screened in for further investigation, but for whom different caseworkers would disagree about the need for opening a case.

The estimates we present are local average treatment effect (LATE) estimates for families where different caseworkers would disagree about how to handle their cases. In the language of instrumental variables estimation, our analysis relies on "complier" families who might plausibly have a case opened (or a child removed), or not, based on caseworker assignment, not on families whose circumstances would always or never yield an open case or a child removal. We note, however, that especially with respect to case opening, the complier population in this analysis is quite large and appears broadly similar to the full sample on background characteristics such as race, age, and gender. As child removal is a less common outcome and one where compliers make up a smaller share of the sample, we should be more cautious about presuming that the LATE of child removal among this group can be extrapolated more broadly. Section A.2 of the Appendix describes our analysis of compliers in more detail.

4.2.2 Estimated Causal Effects of Case Opening and Removal

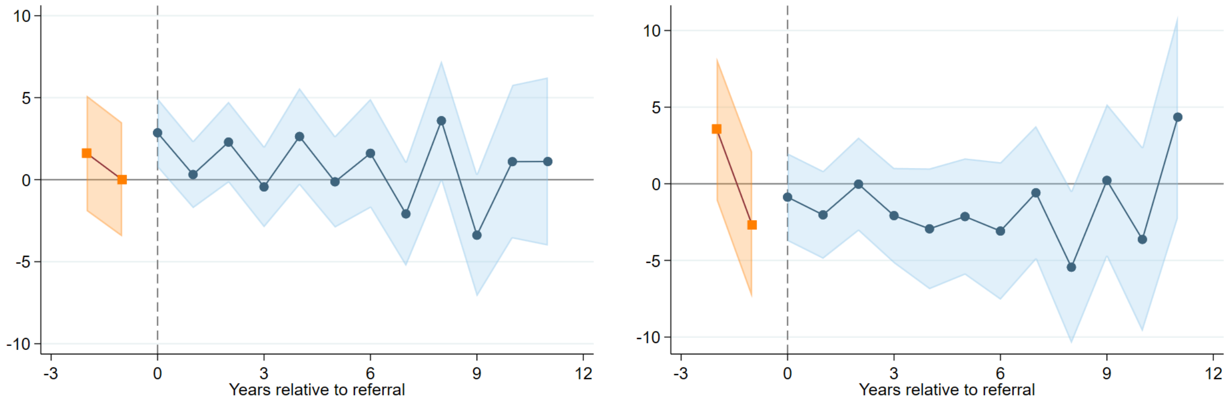
Figure 3 presents over-time estimates of the effect of CPS intervention on adults' voter registration and turnout. The dashed vertical line on each panel indicates the timing of the family's referral to CPS, with years to the left showing the pre-referral period and those to the right the post-period. Thus, the points to the left of the dashed line allow for a check of the parallel trends assumption: we should not see an "effect" of CPS contact before the referral even takes place, and if we did we would worry about the validity of the design. These pre-trend coefficients do not differ from zero in ways that would prompt concern, so we proceed with interpretation of the main estimates.

Figure 3: Effects of CPS Intervention on Political Participation

Tendency to Open a Case

(a) Registration (%)

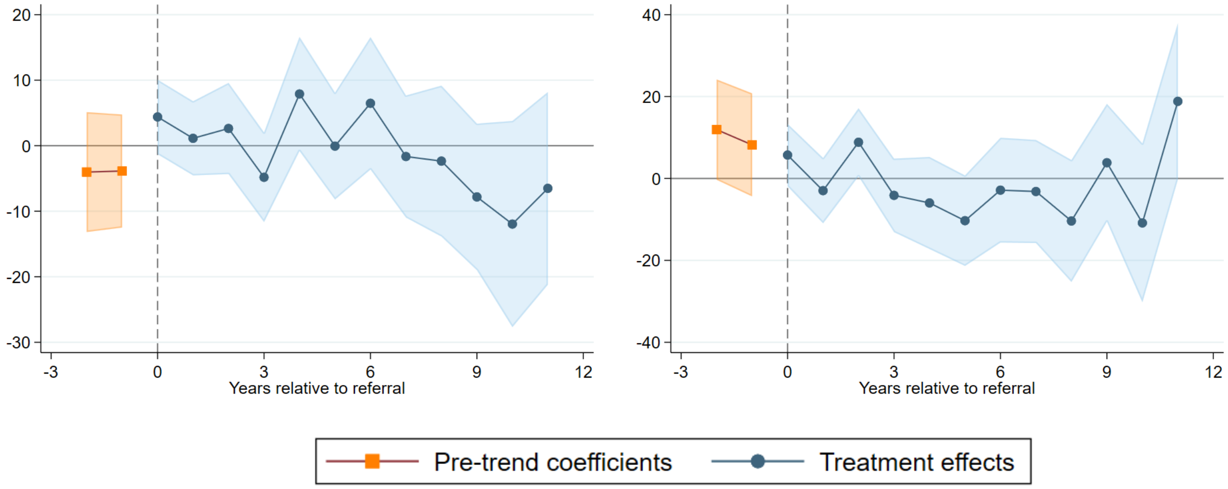
(b) Voting (%)



Tendency to Remove a Child

(c) Registration (%)

(d) Voting (%)



Notes: These figures report the effects of being assigned to an investigator who opens more cases in figures a and b, and of being assigned to an investigator who removes more children in figures c and d. For example in Figure 3a, the estimate of approximately four in year 0 indicates that being assigned to an investigator with a tendency to open a case 10 percentage points more likely to open a case than the average caseworker increases registration in the year of the referral by $0.1 \cdot 4 = 0.4$ percentage points. 90% confidence intervals are reported throughout with clustering at the individual level. The dashed vertical line is the year of the referral (year 0). In orange are the pre-trends tests, and in blue the effects of investigators after the referral.

The top row of plots uses investigators' tendency to open a CPS case to learn about how case opening shapes participation in the years that follow, and the bottom row of plots focuses on child removals. In both cases, we see null effects of CPS contact on political participation: the exact point estimates vary year-to-year, and there is some estimation noise, but we do not see any systematic evidence of mobilization or demobilization in the wake of these types of CPS contact. Point estimates indicate that being assigned to an investigator who is ten percentage points more likely to open cases for their assigned families increases registration between 0-0.4% ($0.1\phi_d$, with $0 \leq \phi_d \leq 4$) depending on the year. Estimates pooling all years after the referral together are presented in Columns 2 and 3 of Appendix Table A3. For example, effects on turnout of opening a case and of removing a child are respectively -1.31% and +1.15%, both indistinguishable from zero and confirming with more precision the patterns shown in Figure 3.

Thus, we find no significant effect of CPS case opening or removal on adults' voter registration or turnout in the years that follow. This is perhaps unsurprising given the descriptive patterns outlined in the previous section: Although voter registration and voting rates are much lower among CPS-referred individuals (compared to county residents overall), those who have experienced an open case or removal of a child register and vote at similar rates as those who have only experienced a CPS investigation, as well as those referred to CPS whose referrals CPS did not investigate. These descriptive findings, depicted in Figure 1, support our estimate of a null effect; if CPS intervention impacted political participation, we would expect to see gradually lower participation among individuals with more intensive CPS intervention.

The causal estimates rely on a design that makes specific assumptions about what would have happened absent CPS intervention, and that relies on specific margins of intervention (that is, we learn about the effects of CPS intervention from the outcomes of families who are treated differently by different caseworkers, not those that would always or never have a child removed from the household regardless of caseworker assignment). However, we do not think our estimates are driven by violations of these assumptions or by the use of a narrow pool of families: as noted above, "compliers" represent a large fraction of the sample and are broadly similar to the rest of the sample, particularly when examining the process of opening a case. It is also not the case that these estimates merely appear null due to a lack of statistical power to detect substantively-important effects. Our confidence intervals, especially those for the pooled estimates shown in Table A3, exclude effects smaller than those seen in previous papers on the criminal legal system and political participation. Section A.3 of the Appendix further discusses statistical power.

Finally, Appendix Table A5 shows that the overall findings of zero effect are not driven by an averaging of some positive and some negative causal effects in different relevant subgroups of the overall sample. For most theoretically relevant subgroups—including mothers only, those referred for the first time, and those alleged as perpetrators of abuse or neglect—there is a statistically insignificant zero effect on both registration and voting within the subgroup for both case opening and child removal. (These results are necessarily less precisely estimated than the overall results, since the subgroups are smaller than the whole sample.) For fathers, there is a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) 3 percentage-point positive effect on registration for a case opening, for Black adults, there are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) 3 percentage-point positive effects on registration and 4 percentage-point negative effects on voting for a case opening, and for young adults (under age 26) there is a 4 percentage-point positive effect on voting for a case opening ($0.1 > p > 0.05$), but we are hesitant to over-interpret these four significant results among 32 hypothesis tests, especially since there are null effects for registration or voting for child removal in every single subgroup. Effects among Black adults are not consistent in sign across the two margins of political participation. Appendix Figure A2, furthermore, shows that the heterogeneous effects for Black adults may be driven by significant pre-trends in that subgroup. As such, we encourage future work into potential heterogeneity, but do not read our analyses as evidence for any such patterns.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we bring detailed data on child welfare system contact into the scholarly literature on political participation. Child welfare systems frequently intervene with U.S. families, particularly Black, Native American, and low-income families. Scholars have previously analyzed how individuals' various contacts with the state—from receiving public benefits to being incarcerated—shape political participation. Like the criminal legal system, the child welfare system holds immense coercive power; after investigating parents, the system can forcibly separate families, sometimes permanently. As such, it is a central system of social control over marginalized groups (Roberts, 2002).

This paper extends prior theory and research on the political implications of state contact to consider the child welfare system, drawing on linked administrative data in Allegheny County, PA. First, we find that parents who have been referred to CPS—and had contact at any level—register to vote and vote at much lower rates than other county residents. This descriptive pattern is important in itself, reflecting the relative absence of these important stakeholders from the voting public. Elected officials oversee the operation of CPS, yet people with direct, personal experience with the system are starkly underrepresented in the electorate. Given observable differences between CPS-impacted and non-impacted groups, we would expect that increasing voting among CPS-impacted residents would shift the average policy preferences of the electorate. For instance, CPS-impacted people are more likely to have low incomes, identify as Black, and, at least in Allegheny County, register with the Democratic Party. Voter outreach efforts might consider additional outreach with CPS-impacted people to move towards a more inclusive and representative electorate, analogously to the reasons that scholars and activists have experimented with voter outreach to voting-eligible individuals with a felony criminal record (Gerber et al., 2015).

Second, we employ a research design combining random-caseworker-assignment study methods with event-study approaches to examine whether the association between CPS contact and political participation is causal. Using these methods, we find precisely-estimated null effects of opening a CPS case (or having a child removed) on voter registration and on voter turnout. These findings are informative, especially in light of prior theory and research that point either to the demobilizing effect of encounters with disciplinary state systems such as CPS, or to the mobilizing effect of such encounters among those with politicized group identities. These results are also surprising in light of the two main mechanisms by which involuntary encounters with punitive state institutions are hypothesized to affect political mobilization. Having a CPS case opened or a child removed from the home is a clear statement that the government does not see parents as fit. Parents subject to these interventions experience an adversarial, controlling state (Fong, 2023), and so such events could affect political participation through an interpretive or political learning mechanism. Having a CPS case opened or a child removed from the home can also be a considerable drain on a family's time and financial resources as they attend hearings and comply with court conditions in an effort to resolve the matter (Edwards et al., 2023; Fong, 2023), and so could also affect political participation through a resources mechanism. Thus, our results suggest that these prior theories of political participation among disadvantaged groups who have involuntary interactions with the state are not fully capturing the reasons why marginalized people may or may not register or turn out to vote. Our causal identification strategy also enables us to address concerns about selection bias inherent in much research in this area, as families with and without CPS involvement likely differ in unobservable ways. Our cross-sectional, correlational analyses show a negative relationship between CPS involvement and voting, yet our null causal effects suggest that this association is likely driven by factors other than CPS intervention.

Of course, it is difficult to substantively interpret and assign a definitive mechanism to a null effect. One possibility is that, because CPS involvement involves both punitive elements and social service elements, its function as a type of political learning mixes messages of state marginalization and state support, with neither clearly dominating the other as a political mobilizer or demobilizer. Another possibility, not inconsistent with the first, is that CPS involvement can both provide resources to families (in the form of various types of social services assistance) and be resource-costly to families (because of changes to benefits eligibility as well as the taxing process of engaging with CPS), and so CPS' function as a type of tax or benefit to families' resources mixes elements that might both mobilize and demobilize.[12]

---

[12] While we might consider analyzing political effects separately for those who did and did not receive social services following their CPS contact, these families differ in a variety of other ways that preclude a causal interpretation of this comparison.

Finally, it is possible that interpretive and/or resource effects are operating on non-voting political behaviors. Voting and voter registration are just one type of political participation. CPS may shift other forms of civic and political engagement (in either direction) that the present study is unable to examine, such as attending protests, attending political meetings, or donating to a political cause (Walker, 2020). These types of political engagement are essential to study as well and might reveal additional dimensions of heterogeneity, possibly along lines of race or class (Michener, 2019). At minimum, surveys of political engagement should include detailed questions on CPS involvement. While our data do not allow us to directly test which of these possible explanations might be most responsible for our result, we hope that future quantitative and qualitative research is able to build on this research to directly test some of these proposed mechanisms.

As we encourage scholars to take up this challenge, we note the difficulty of isolating causal effects of CPS involvement on *voluntary* contacts with the government, such as use of particular state programs or services (under the theory that CPS-impacted people might be trying to stay out of sight). The nature of CPS contact suggests caution with this approach, as CPS cases often require or strongly encourage parents to take up certain social services. Thus, shifts in social service use following CPS intervention (Grimon, 2023) may not indicate attitudinal changes so much as compliance with demands imposed by CPS itself.

In this paper, we have focused on political participation among adults involved in CPS cases. Of course, children are also impacted by CPS involvement. For children, having an open CPS case and/or being removed from home are experiences that, akin to schooling and policing (Shedd, 2015; Geller, 2021), may socialize them politically. Placing children in foster care is also a pivotal life course event that may shift youth's trajectories (Bald et al., 2022; Baron and Gross, 2022; Doyle Jr, 2007) in ways that facilitate or hinder political participation. Our study is unable to estimate the effect of CPS intervention on children experiencing this intervention. With our study design–comparing within-person political participation trends before and after CPS intervention for those assigned to different caseworkers–we cannot observe children's political participation before CPS intervention because CPS intervention happens during childhood, before individuals reach voting age. Our findings do not speak to the impact of CPS contact on the political behavior of people subject to CPS intervention as children, and we recommend future research take up this question.

Qualitative work has provided rich insight into how punitive state systems shape the political lives of race-class subjugated communities (Weaver, Prowse and Piston, 2020, 2019; Lerman and Weaver, 2014). Data from existing qualitative research suggest varying ways that CPS intersects with political engagement. Some CPS-impacted parents report waning interest in state and political affairs, based on what they observed about their relative social positions vis-à-vis government authorities. For others, meanwhile, the CPS experience inspires collective mobilization to combat the injustice they see (Fong, 2023). However, because CPS has primarily been studied by sociologists and social work scholars, the system's political consequences have not been the primary focus of extant research. Further qualitative research focused specifically on this dimension of the system may be illuminating in itself and may also help to identify additional outcome measures and potential mechanisms to explore.

The political consequences of child welfare system involvement merit additional scholarly attention. We see our research as helping to start this conversation, as the present study does not necessarily provide definitive evidence regarding the effect of CPS contact on voter registration and voting at all places and times. Allegheny County during the period of the study reflects one policy context of many. Although we do not have any reason to believe that CPS experiences in Allegheny County differ substantially from experiences elsewhere, CPS practice – as well as voter registration and voting policies – vary somewhat across the country in ways that might affect the relationship we examine. We hope that researchers will continue to build the evidence base on CPS and political participation through different research designs in other policy contexts.

References

Allegheny County Department of Human Services. 2021. “Allegheny County Data Warehouse.”.

URL: *https://www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=6442464576*

Angrist, Joshua D and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. 2009. *Mostly harmless econometrics: An empiricist's companion*. Princeton university press.

Anoll, Allison and Mackenzie Israel-Trummel. 2019. "Do felony disenfranchisement laws (de) mobilize? A case of surrogate participation." *The Journal of Politics* 81(4):1523–1527.

Ansolabehere, Stephen and Eitan Hersh. 2010. "The Quality of Voter Registration Records: A State-by-State Analysis." *Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project Working Paper Series* .
URL: *https://www.vote.caltech.edu/documents/187/reg_quality_report_8-5-10.pdf*

Bald, Anthony, Eric Chyn, Justine Hastings and Margarita Machelett. 2022. "The causal impact of removing children from abusive and neglectful homes." *Journal of Political Economy* 130(7):1919–1962.

Baron, E Jason and Max Gross. 2022. Is there a foster care-to-prison pipeline? Evidence from quasi-randomly assigned investigators. Technical report National Bureau of Economic Research.

Ben-Menachem, Jonathan and Kevin T Morris. 2023. "Ticketing and turnout: the participatory consequences of low-level police contact." *American political science review* 117(3):822–834.

Berger, Lawrence M., Maria Cancian, Laura Cuesta and Jennifer L. Noyes. 2016. "Families at the Intersection of the Criminal Justice and Child Protective Services Systems." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 665(1):171–94.

Berrick, J. 2011. "Trends and issues in the US child welfare system." *Child protection systems: International trends and orientations* pp. 17–35.

Brame, Robert, Shawn D Bushway, Ray Paternoster and Michael G Turner. 2014. "Demographic patterns of cumulative arrest prevalence by ages 18 and 23." *Crime & Delinquency* 60(3):471–486.

Bruch, Sarah, Myra Ferree and Joe Soss. 2010. “From policy to polity: Democracy, paternalism, and the incorporation of disadvantaged citizens.” *American Sociological Review* 75(2):205–226.

Burden, Barry C, Jason M Fletcher, Pamela Herd, Donald P Moynihan and Bradley M Jones. 2017. “How different forms of health matter to political participation.” *The journal of politics* 79(1):166–178.

Campbell, Andrea. 2012. “Policy makes mass politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15:333–351.

Campbell, Andrea Louise. 2002. “Self-interest, social security, and the distinctive participation patterns of senior citizens.” *American Political Science Review* 96(3):565–574.

Carson, E. Ann. 2020. *Prisoners in 2019*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Chizeck, Seth, Kelley Fong, Rebecca Goldstein and Ariel R White. 2023. “Political Underrepresentation Among Public Benefits Recipients: Evidence from Linked Administrative Data.” *Urban Affairs Review* p. 10780874231191703.

Chyn, Eric, Brigham Frandsen and Emily Leslie. 2024. Examiner and judge designs in economics: A practitioner’s guide. Working paper.

Clair, Matthew. 2020. *Privilege and punishment: How race and class matter in criminal court*. Princeton University Press.

Doyle Jr, Joseph J. 2007. “Child protection and child outcomes: Measuring the effects of foster care.” *American Economic Review* 97(5):1583–1610.

Drake, Brett and Shanta Pandey. 1996. “Understanding the Relationship Between Neighborhood Poverty and Specific Types of Child Maltreatment.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20(11):1003–18.

Edwards, Frank, Kelley Fong, Victoria Copeland, Mical Raz and Alan Dettlaff. 2023. *Administrative Burdens in Child Welfare Systems*. RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences.

Fong, Kelley. 2019. "Neighborhood Inequality in the Prevalence of Reported and Substantiated Child Maltreatment." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 90:13–21.

Fong, Kelley. 2020. "Concealment and Constraint: Child Protective Services Fears and Poor Mothers' Institutional Engagement." *Social Forces* 97(4):1785–810.

Fong, Kelley. 2023. *Investigating Families: Motherhood in the Shadow of Child Protective Services*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Garcia-Rios, Sergio, Nazita Lajevardi, Kassra AR Oskooii and Hannah L Walker. 2023. "The Participatory Implications of Racialized Policy Feedback." *Perspectives on Politics* 21(3):932–950.

Geller, Amanda. 2021. "Youth–police contact: Burdens and inequities in an adverse childhood experience, 2014–2017." *American journal of public health* 111(7):1300–1308.

Gerber, Alan S, Gregory A Huber, Marc Meredith, Daniel R Biggers and David J Hendry. 2015. "Can incarcerated felons be (Re) integrated into the political system? Results from a field experiment." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(4):912–926.

Gerber, Alan S, Gregory A Huber, Marc Meredith, Daniel R Biggers and David J Hendry. 2017. "Does incarceration reduce voting? Evidence about the political consequences of spending time in prison." *The Journal of Politics* 79(4):1130–1146.

Gonzalez Van Cleve, Nicole. 2020. *Crook County: Racism and injustice in America's largest criminal court*. Stanford University Press.

Grimon, Marie-Pascale. 2023. "Effects of the Child Protection System on Parents." Working Paper, Swedish Institute for Social Research.

Henry, Colleen and Vicki Lens. 2021. "Marginalizing Mothers: Child Maltreatment Registries, Statutory Schemes, and Reduced Opportunities for Employment." *CUNY Law Review* 24:1–34.

Hook, Jennifer L, Jennifer L Romich, JoAnn S Lee, Maureen O Marcenko and Ji Young Kang. 2016. "Trajectories of economic disconnection among families in the child welfare system." *Social Problems* 63(2):161–179.

Kim, Hyunil, Christopher Wildeman, Melissa Jonson-Reid and Brett Drake. 2017. "Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment Among U.S. Children." *American Journal of Public Health* 107(2):274–80.

Laniyonu, Ayobami. 2019. "The political consequences of policing: Evidence from New York City." *Political Behavior* 41(2):527–558.

Lee, Tina. 2016. *Catching a Case: Inequality and Fear in New York City's Child Welfare System.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Lerman, Amy E and Vesla M Weaver. 2020. *Arresting citizenship: The democratic consequences of American crime control.* University of Chicago Press.

Lerman, Amy and Vesla Weaver. 2014. *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McDonough, Anne, Ted Enamorado and Tali Mendelberg. 2022. "Jailed while presumed innocent: The demobilizing effects of pretrial incarceration." *The Journal of Politics* 84(3):1777–1790.

Merritt, Darcey H. 2021. "Lived Experiences of Racism Among Child Welfare-Involved Parents." *Race and Social Problems* 13:63–72.

Michener, Jamila. 2019. "Policy feedback in a racialized polity." *Policy Studies Journal* 47(2):423–450.

Mueller-Smith, Michael. 2015. "The criminal and labor market impacts of incarceration.".

Nelson, Barbara. 1984. *Making an Issue of Child Abuse: Political Agenda Setting for Social Problems.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ojeda, Christopher. 2015. “Depression and political participation.” *Social Science Quarterly* 96(5):1226–1243.

Pager, Devah, Bart Bonikowski and Bruce Western. 2009. “Discrimination in a low-wage labor market: A field experiment.” *American sociological review* 74(5):777–799.

Phillips, Susan D. and Alan J. Dettlaff. 2009. “More Than Parents in Prison: The Broader Overlap Between the Criminal Justice and Child Welfare Systems.” *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 3:3–22.

Pierson, Paul. 1993. “When effect becomes cause: Policy feedback and political change.” *World politics* 45(4):595–628.

Putnam-Hornstein, Emily, John J. Prindle and Rebecca Rebbe. 2022. “Community Disadvantage, Family Socioeconomic Status, and Racial/Ethnic Differences in Maltreatment Reporting Risk During Infancy.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 130:4.

Raz, Mical. 2020. *Abusive Policies: How the American Child Welfare System Lost Its Way*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Reich, Jennifer A. 2005. *Fixing Families: Parents, Power, and the Child Welfare System*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

Roberts, Dorothy. 2002. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York: Basic Books.

Roberts, Dorothy. 2012. “Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers.” *UCLA Law Review* 59(6):1474–500.

Service, Congressional Research. 2022. “Child Welfare: Purposes, Federal Programs, and Funding.” *Retrieved April* 29:2022.
URL: *https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF10590.pdf)*

Shedd, Carla. 2015. *Unequal city: Race, schools, and perceptions of injustice*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Soss, Joe. 1999. "Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action." *American Political Science Review* 93(2):363–80.

Soss, Joe and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20:565–91.

Sugie, Naomi F. and Emma Conner. 2022. "Marginalization or Incorporation? Welfare Receipt and Political Participation among Young Adults." *Social Problems* 69(3):659–77.

Tolliver, Destiny G, Laura S Abrams, Christopher Biely, Benjamin PL Meza, Adam Schickedanz, Alma D Guerrero, Nicholas J Jackson, Eraka Bath, Nia Heard-Garris, Rebecca Dudovitz et al. 2023. "United States Youth Arrest and Health Across the Life Course: A Nationally Representative Longitudinal Study." *Academic pediatrics* 23(4):722–730.

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2020. *The AFCARS Report, No. 27*. Washington, DC: .

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2021. *Child Maltreatment 2019*. Washington, DC: .

Walker, Hannah L. 2020. "Targeted: The mobilizing effect of perceptions of unfair policing practices." *The Journal of Politics* 82(1):119–134.

Watson, Sara. 2015. "Does welfare conditionality reduce democratic participation?" *Comparative Political Studies* 48(5):645–686.

Weaver, Vesla, Gwen Prowse and Spencer Piston. 2019. "Too much knowledge, too little power: An assessment of political knowledge in highly policed communities." *The Journal of Politics* 81(3):1153–1166.

Weaver, Vesla, Gwen Prowse and Spencer Piston. 2020. "Withdrawing and Drawing In: Political Discourse in Policed Communities." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5(3):604–47.

Weaver, Vesla M. and Amy E. Lerman. 2010. “Political Consequences of the Carceral State.” *American Political Science Review* 104(4):817–33.

White, Ariel. 2019. “Misdemeanor disenfranchisement? The demobilizing effects of brief jail spells on potential voters.” *American Political Science Review* 113(2):311–324.

White, Ariel R. 2022. “Political participation amid mass incarceration.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25:111–130.

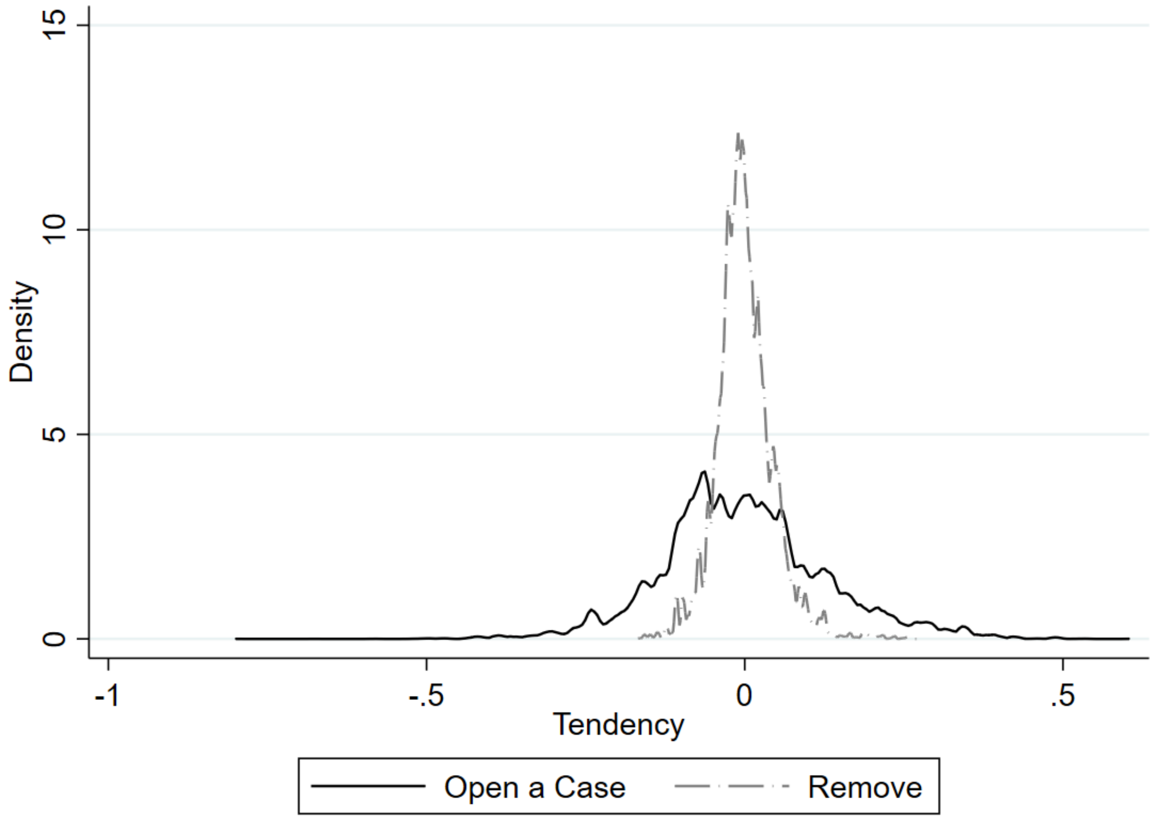
Woodward, Kerry C. 2021. “Race, Gender, and Poverty Governance: The Case of the U.S. Child Welfare System.” *Social Politics* 28(2):428–50.

Yi, Youngmin, Frank Edwards and Christopher Wildeman. 2020. “Cumulative Prevalence of Confirmed Maltreatment and Foster Care Placement for US Children by Race/Ethnicity, 2011–2016.” *American Journal of Public Health* 110(5):704–09.

A Appendix

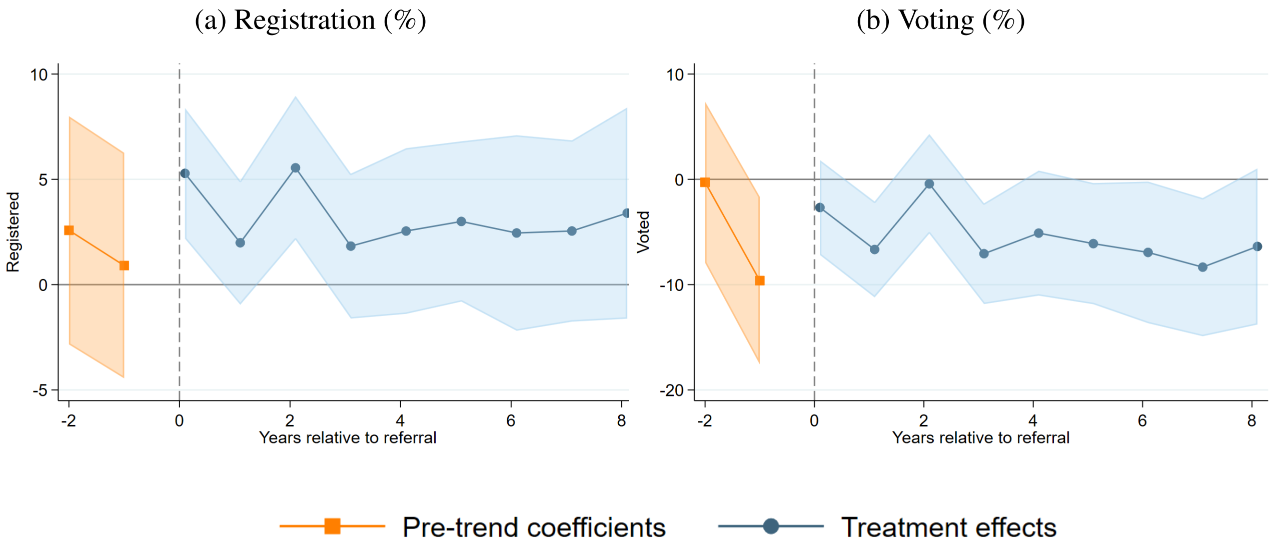
A.1 Additional Figures and Tables

Figure A1: Variation in Tendency Measures



Notes: This graph presents the distributions of the tendency measures to open a case and remove after residulization on office-year fixed effects. Before residualization, the tendency measures only take values between 0 and 1. After residualization, the tendency measures indicate the variation in the tendency to open a case and to remove relative to the average in a given office-year. So for example, some investigators have a tendency to open a case that is -0.3 which indicates that they are 30 percentage points less likely to open a case than the average investigator in that office-year.

Figure A2: Effects of Opening a Case on Political Participation of Black Americans



(a) Registration (%)

(b) Voting (%)

Notes: These figures report the effects of being assigned to an investigator who opens more cases for the sample of Black Americans. 90% confidence intervals are reported throughout with clustering at the individual level. The dashed vertical line is the year of the referral (year 0). In orange are the pre-trends tests, and in blue the effects of investigators after the referral. The outcomes are reported in percentage points.

Table A1: Number of Individuals with CPS Interaction, May 2009 - Dec 2018

Restrictions	**Year Observations**	**Unique Individuals**	**Referrals**
1. On Referrals	5944851	217701	108569
2. Demographics for Voter Matching	5468298	192248	107457
3. Home address in PA	5380023	189256	107138
4. Adult to vote at least once	3095999	126199	105335
5. Political outcomes before referral	2654141	95980	102409
6. No CPS record expungement	2478945	91816	96593
7. No Termination of Parental Rights	2478365	91795	96589

Notes: This table provides more detail on sample size restrictions. The first row reports the total number of observations across years, unique individuals and referrals listed between May 2009 and December 2018. Each subsequent row adds an additional restriction. The second row restricts individuals for whom the name, gender and date of birth were not missing which were used for matching to voting registration records. The third row restricts to the subset that had a home address listed in Pennsylvania when they were called into CPS. The fourth row to those that had reached the age of 18 to be able to vote at least once in the years where we have voting registration records. In addition to being of age to register vote, our identification strategy requires availability of some political participation data prior to the referral. The fifth row thus restricts to adults for whom we could observe at least some political outcomes data prior their CPS referral: this excludes individuals who had just barely turned 18 and individuals referred too early in our sample period to have political participation prior to their referral. A subset of referrals for sexual and physical abuse prior to 2017 were expunged from CPS records due to legal requirements. So as not to introduce selection into our sample, in the sixth row we remove the referrals that were not expunged from this subset even though they could have been (these referrals were not expunged because they had met sufficiently high severity levels relative to the expunged referrals). In the seventh row, we remove a small subset of individuals who had a termination of parental rights as their records may not be traceable over time.

Table A2: Pre-trends F-tests

	Opened a Case	Opened w/o Removal	Child Removed
Registered	0.751	0.583	0.597
Registered as democrat	0.227	0.033	0.244
Registered as republican	0.906	0.682	0.388
Voted	0.267	0.219	0.176

Notes: This table reports the p-values of the F-tests for pre-trends in the two years prior to a referral using years at least three years before as a reference. Each column reports tests for detectable differences of a different CPS intervention margin. For example, the first column tests whether the families assigned to investigators with a higher tendency to open a case had different pre-trends in the two years prior to the referral. Subsequent columns report the equivalent for investigators who open more cases without removing a child and for investigators who open more cases with a child removal.

Table A3: Effects of CPS Interventions on Political Participation

		Political Participation	
	(1) First Stage	(2) Registration	(3) Voting
Tendency to Open a Case	0.69***	1.01	-1.31
	[0.01]	[0.95]	[1.12]
Tendency to Open a Case w/out a Removal	0.67***	1.06	-1.78
	[0.01]	[1.05]	[1.25]
Tendency to Remove a Child	0.37***	1.24	1.15
	[0.02]	[2.57]	[3.10]
Number of Obserations	111711	873443	873443
Number of Clusters	61323	90518	90518
Prior Mean		67.21	18.97

Notes: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$ Each cell reports the regression estimates of the outcomes listed in the columns on the tendency listed on each row. Observations are at the individual-referral level in column (1) and at the year-individual-referral level with individual-referral and year fixed effects included in columns (2) and (3). Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Reduced form estimates in columns (2) and (3) are reported in percentage points (%). The effect of the tendency to remove a child is always holding constant the tendency to open a case without a removal: it is to be interpreted as the effect of removing more children without opening more cases without a child removal, and conversely for the tendency to open a case without a removal. We report investigated families' political participation prior to the referral at the bottom of the table.

Table A4: Effects by Subgroup and CPS Intervention

	Registered		Voted	
	(1) Opened a Case	(2) Removed	(3) Opened a Case	(4) Removed
1. All Adults	1.01	1.24	-1.31	1.15
	[0.95]	[2.57]	[1.12]	[3.10]
2. Mothers	1.48	-1.23	-2.78	-2.98
	[1.56]	[4.13]	[1.95]	[5.45]
3. Fathers	2.82**	4.91	1.19	1.91
	[1.41]	[3.81]	[1.53]	[4.23]
4. First Referral in Sample	1.22	0.30	-2.73	7.43
	[1.50]	[4.16]	[1.81]	[4.86]
5. Alleged Perpetrators	0.92	0.66	-1.41	-0.87
	[1.33]	[3.59]	[1.68]	[4.51]
6. Black American	3.02**	-0.06	-4.38**	-1.00
	[1.34]	[3.63]	[1.79]	[4.61]
7. White American	-0.30	1.10	1.08	-2.07
	[1.53]	[4.22]	[1.62]	[4.67]
8. Young Adults	3.77	2.36	4.43*	-3.14
	[3.01]	[8.06]	[2.62]	[7.01]

Notes: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$ Observations are at the year-individual level with individual-referral and year fixed effects throughout. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Columns 1 and 2 examine effects of CPS on registration, whereas columns 3 and 4 are for voting. Columns 1 and 3 reports the effects on voting of opening a case, and column 2 and 4 the effects on voting of removing a child while controlling for the tendency to open a case without a removal. For comparison, the first row reports the effects for the full sample of adults presented in Table A3. The following rows report the estimates for: mothers (row 2), fathers (row 3), the first referral in 2009-2018 for each adult (row 4), alleged perpetrators of the abuse or neglect (row 5), adults listed as Black American (row 6), adults listed as White American (row 7), and young adults below the age of 26 (row 8).

A.2 Compliers

The estimates presented in the paper of the causal effect of CPS case opening or child removal are based on an instrumental-variables approach that returns a LATE, a local average treatment effect, among compliers. In this section, we consider how much of the sample is made up of compliers and what their characteristics are, in order to get a sense of whether we are attempting to extrapolate from a small and unrepresentative set of families. Briefly, it appears that the complier population makes up a fairly large share of our sample (especially when considering case opening) and is broadly representative of the set of families encountering CPS.

Our estimates of the share of compliers—of how many families in the sample could plausibly have seen a case opened, or not, based simply on their caseworker assignment—depends on estimates of caseworker tendencies to open cases or remove children.[13] These tendencies are noisily estimated for caseworkers that handle few cases in our dataset, so we repeat this calculation with several different thresholds of number of cases handled and find that it yields fairly similar estimates of the share of compliers. When limiting to caseworkers who handled at least ten cases as in our analyses, we calculate a complier share ranging of 65% across the various CPS offices and years in the sample when considering case opening, and 21% when considering child removal. These may be overestimates of the complier shares as the variance in tendency measures may be overestimated due to noise. If we more conservatively limit to caseworkers that handled at least 70 cases during the period of our dataset, we reach similar conclusions: 44% compliers for opening a case and 13% for child removal. These indicate that a substantial fraction of our sample are compliers, especially when focusing on the decision to open a case.

Next, we consider the characteristics of compliers[14]: how are the families that drive our estimates different from or similar to the full set of families encountering CPS? Table A5 compares the background characteristics of compliers to the rest of the sample. Particularly on the margin of case-opening, where compliers represent a large fraction of the sample, compliers are broadly quite similar to the rest of the sample on dimensions such as race, age, and gender. The largest differences emerge around the types of allegations included in referrals: compliers are much more likely to have allegations of drug abuse, and less likely to have allegations of physical abuse, than the rest of the sample (suggesting that drug cases have substantially more room for caseworker disagreement, while physical abuse cases are ones where caseworkers generally tend to agree on a course of action). Somewhat larger differences emerge when considering child removal, a rarer outcome and one where there appears to be less caseworker disagreement overall (compliers represent a smaller share of the sample). Here, compliers are more likely to be Black, less likely to be women, and more likely to have allegations of a parent struggling or drug abuse or physical abuse, compared to the sample as a whole. Thus, we may wish to be more careful about extrapolating the LATE of child removal among this group to the broader set of families with CPS contact, compared to the estimates for case opening.

---

[13] The share of always takers can be estimated from the share of cases that the lowest intervening caseworker decides to intervene in, and the share of never takers from the highest tendency to intervene. Together, these provide an estimation of the share of compliers, under the assumption that there are no defiers.

[14] For a discussion of compliance and the calculations presented in this section, see Angrist and Pischke (2009, p.171).

Table A5: Complier Characteristics at each CPS Margin (%)

	Opened a Case	Child Removed
Black American	-5	14
Missing Race	-2	2
Woman	0	-7
Young Adult	6	8
More than One Referral	1	9
Allegation: Parent Struggling	0	41
Allegation: Parent Drug Abuse	14	12
Allegation: Failure to Protect Child	-6	-3
Allegation: Physical Abuse	-23	30
Ever Registered Prior to Referral	-2	2
Ever Voted Prior to Referral	-4	-5

Notes: This table reports how different the compliers are for the two margins of intervention (opening a case and removing a child) relative to the full sample. Characteristics are listed in rows, and coefficients are to be interpreted as the percent increase/decrease in likelihood of having a given characteristic. So, for example, individuals where investigators would disagree about whether to open a case are 5% less likely to be Black American, but those where investigators would disagree to remove a child are 14% more likely to be Black American. Young adult refers to adults below the age of 26 at the time of the referral.

A.3 Statistical Power

In this section, we consider the statistical power of our design. Table A6 first presents a fairly straightforward approach based on considering a simple composite summary of our overall study findings: an F-test of the null hypothesis that *neither* margin of CPS intervention (opening a case without a removal or removing a child) has any effect on either of our outcome measures (registration or voting). This is a particularly well-powered approach even relative to some of those shown in the paper, as it pools all years of data to look for *any* change in participation on *either* margin. The first row of the table presents the p-value of this joint F-test, establishing that consistent with the estimates shown in the paper, we do not reject the null. Then row 2 considers the statistical power of a slightly simplified version of that F-test, using the analytical formula for the power of an F-test and ignoring (in column 2) the individually-clustered nature of the data we use. This approach gives an approximate sense of power (and indicates that our design is extremely well-powered), but is limited in that it does not incorporate information about clustering because there is no obvious way to do so given the formula. As seen in a comparison of the p-value on the F-test across Columns 1 (accounting for clustering) and 2 (not considering clustering), our estimates are slightly noisier when considering clustering, in ways that are not captured by this power calculation. Nevertheless, we read Table A.3 as evidence that the null results presented throughout the paper represent relatively precise and well-powered zeroes rather than simply noisy estimates obscuring substantively-important effects.

Table A6: Power Calculations

	(1) With Clustering	(2) No Clustering
F-test pvalue	0.43	0.29
Test’s Statiscal Power		1.00

Notes: This first row in this table reports the pvalue of the F test that neither margin of CPS intervention (opening a case without a removal and opening a case with a removal) has any effect on either registration or voting, and the second row the corresponding power of this test. The first column includes clustering at the individual level, while the second column does not.

A.4 Hypothetical Electorate

The descriptive section of the paper includes a back-of-the-envelope calculation of how different the Allegheny County electorate would have looked if CPS-affected adults had voted at the county's average rate in 2016. Here we briefly describe that calculation.

We begin with a snapshot of the Pennsylvania voter file from spring 2017, limiting it to 653,446 voters with Allegheny County addresses who voted in the 2016 election.[15] We then use the wru() package to impute race for these voters, using surname and county Census data, and aggregate up these predictions to reach an estimate of 84,238 Black 2016 voters on the file (12.9% of all voters in 2016).

Then, we use information about the CPS-involved sample to calculate how many additional voters would have turned out at the higher turnout rate in 2016. The sample is approximately 35% Black[16] and Black turnout in the sample (shown in Figure 2) was 35.5% in 2016. The overall sample includes 91,752 individuals. So if we imagine moving turnout from .355 to .68, that implies 91752 * .35 *(.68-.355) = 10,437 additional Black voters. We can construct an analogous estimate for voters from other groups (the remaining 65% of the CPS sample, with turnout of 32%), which indicates an additional 19,818 voters.

Finally, we add both these groups of hypothetical additional voters to the actual voting population of the county, yielding a total of 683,701 voters, 94,674 of whom (13.8%) are Black.

---

[15] This number will not precisely match the reported vote count from the Secretary of State's election results due to small amounts of voter file churn, but we need to use the voter file records so that we can impute race based on individual characteristics.

[16] As noted in Table 2, 12% of the sample has missingness on the race variable. To make this calculation conservative, we assume no one in that group was Black; assuming instead that the missingness was random would make the demographic shift we describe look even more extreme.