



The Government at Your Kitchen Table

Learn to trace public decisions from laws and budgets to everyday life

Follow the rules. Find your voice.

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

Free preview · Introduction and Chapter 1
shadeddiemongruebooksgallery.com

SHELF 28 OF 32 · GOVERNMENT · CORE BOOK

The Government at Your Kitchen Table

Learn to trace public decisions from laws and budgets to everyday life

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

Shad Eddie Mongrue Books Gallery · shadeddiemongruebooksgallery.com

The Government at Your Kitchen Table. Free preview edition: Introduction and Chapter 1. © 2026 Shad Eddie Mongrue. All rights reserved. Published by the Shad Eddie Mongrue Books Gallery, shadeddiemongruebooksgallery.com.

This book is for education and general information. It is not personal financial, legal, tax, medical, mental-health, nursing, investment or other professional advice. Talk with a qualified professional about your situation.

Every statistic, study finding and documented example is numbered and listed in the Sources, with a link to the page it came from. Each was checked word for word against its source in October 2026. Stories marked "composite example" are illustrations drawn from common situations; their names and details are not real people. Stories marked "documented example" come from the cited sources.

Research credits: see "Research Credits" at the back of the book. Cover and design: Shad Eddie Mongrue Books Gallery.

Contents

INTRO	An Invitation
CH. 1	The Rules Around Your Kitchen Table
CH. 2	The Quiet Wonder of Shared Rules
CH. 3	Who Decides What
CH. 4	From Promise to Practice
CH. 5	Read the Public Numbers
CH. 6	Ask Better Questions
CH. 7	Participation Beyond Election Day
CH. 8	Trade-Offs in the Household Ledger
CH. 9	Avoid the Common Detours
CH. 10	A Civic Practice for the Long Run
RESEARCH	What the Evidence Says
PRACTICE	Your 30-Day Practice Plan
REFERENCE	Glossary
LETTER	Keep Going
BACK	Sources and Research Credits
BACK	About the Author

An Invitation

A public decision can feel distant until it reaches the kitchen table. A tax rule changes what you owe. A school policy shapes a child's day. A benefit program may help cover a hard stretch, while a road, library, or public meeting quietly affects how your community works. You do not have to admire every decision to be curious about how it came to be. You only have to notice that shared rules and resources are already part of ordinary life.

That is a good reason to learn how government works: not because every problem has a public solution, and not because every official choice is wise, but because understanding the machinery makes the choices less mysterious. You can ask who made a decision, what authority they used, where the money came from, and what happened after the announcement. Those questions turn a vague feeling of being acted upon into a clearer picture of the people, rules, and trade-offs involved.

Consider one example of a policy that may be familiar by name but less familiar in its reach. In 2023, 24.4 million taxpayers, or 15% of individual income tax filers, received \$65.3 billion in Earned Income Tax Credit payments¹. Families with children received 96% of those EITC dollars that year¹. Those figures do not tell you what every household experienced, or whether the credit solved every financial problem. They do show that a rule in the tax system can touch a great many households.

Even the details around a program can matter. The EITC is not counted as income when determining eligibility for or the amount of federally funded public benefits, and a refund that is saved is excluded from resource limits for 12 months after receipt¹. That is a specific rule, not a promise about every household's eligibility or every program detail. But it is a useful reminder: learning the rule beneath the headline can change what you understand about a policy's practical effect.

Curiosity helps you resist two tempting shortcuts. One says government can fix everything if only the right people try. The other says public action is always wasteful or useless. Real life is less tidy. A policy may help with one need and miss another; a program may have a sound goal but uneven delivery; evidence may answer one question while leaving a neighboring one open. You can take

public problems seriously without treating any single institution as either a hero or a villain.

This book invites you to look steadily, not cynically. Government is made up of decisions, responsibilities, procedures, budgets, and people trying to work within limits. You can learn to follow those pieces without becoming a policy specialist or spending every evening buried in reports. The subject is worth loving not because it is simple, but because a little understanding can make public life feel more human, more navigable, and more connected to your own.

Reasons to fall in love with this subject

- **Because the ordinary becomes legible** There is a quiet satisfaction in discovering why a form asks a particular question, which office handles a local concern, or what a line in a budget is meant to support. The answer may not be dramatic. It may even reveal a delay or a limit. Still, knowing what you are looking at is better than being left with a fog of acronyms and assumptions. Government becomes less like a locked cabinet and more like a set of doors you can learn to find.
- **Because shared problems invite shared effort** Some needs are personal, but the conditions around them are shared: safe streets, schools, clean surroundings, and rules people can rely on. Collective action offers ways to address needs that no household can manage alone. It also brings disagreement about priorities, costs, and who should decide. You can appreciate the possibility without pretending consensus is easy. Understanding those tensions is part of caring about your neighbors as well as your own household.
- **Because the details can protect your understanding** A familiar label rarely tells the whole story. Eligibility rules, deadlines, definitions, and exceptions can shape whether a policy reaches the people it is meant to serve. USA Gov describes its benefit guide as a way to explore benefits for individuals and families and learn how to apply for eligible benefits². That is a starting point, not a substitute for checking the responsible program's current rules. Learning to follow the details makes you a more capable reader of public information.
- **Because evidence can be both encouraging and humbling** A careful study can show meaningful benefits and still leave important questions unanswered. In the Oregon Medicaid experiment, coverage increased health care use and reduced financial strain and depression in the first one to two

years, but researchers found no statistically significant effects on physical health or labor market outcomes in that period³. That mixed result is not a failure of learning. It is what honest evidence often looks like: useful, specific, and bounded.

- **Because participation can be practical** You do not have to know everything to ask a clear question or share relevant experience. Anyone can comment on a proposed agency regulation; you do not need to be an academic or expert⁴. But a comment process is not a vote, and a large number of supportive comments does not guarantee a proposal will move forward⁴. Knowing both facts can help you participate with purpose and keep realistic expectations about your influence.
- **Because understanding leaves room to change your mind** Public questions rarely fit into a neat box marked obvious. You may begin with a strong impression, then find a rule, a budget constraint, or a piece of evidence you had not seen. You are allowed to revise your view without embarrassment. That flexibility is not indecision; it is a sign that you are paying attention. Loving this subject can mean enjoying the process of getting closer to a fair account, even when the final answer remains complicated.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO

- Notice the everyday services, rules, and costs that connect public decisions to your household and community.
- Map whether a question belongs to federal, state, or local government before searching for an answer.
- Trace a public idea from a stated promise through lawmaking, funding, administration, and delivery.
- Read a number by checking what it measures, whom it includes, and what comparison it supports.
- Find official information and follow a claim toward the agency or record responsible for it.
- Prepare a clear, respectful question or public comment while keeping its likely influence in perspective.
- Weigh who pays, who benefits, what evidence can show, and what values remain in dispute.

How to use this book

You can read this book from beginning to end, letting each chapter build a piece of the map. Or you can start with the question already on your mind: a tax credit, a school issue, a public meeting, or a claim you saw online. If you jump ahead, use the chapters as a route back to the basics. First identify the responsible level of government, then look for the rule or record, and only then decide what the available evidence seems to say.

Keep the practice small enough to fit real life. Choose one question that matters to you, write down what you already believe, and note what you would need to verify. As you read, add the relevant office, document, deadline, or unresolved uncertainty. You do not need to chase every side issue. A useful stopping point is knowing what you can support, what you cannot yet tell, and where a responsible next step might be.

The chapters are meant to help you build a habit, not assign you a second job. Take a pause when a process feels unfamiliar; return to the question in plain language. You may find that the answer is available, that it requires asking someone, or that the public record does not settle it. Each outcome teaches you something about how decisions are made and what remains open. Let your level of involvement match your time, interest, and circumstances.

HOW THIS BOOK HANDLES EVIDENCE

This book is educational, not personal legal, financial, tax, or other professional advice. It distinguishes documented examples, which are built from cited facts, from composite illustrations, which are fictional and are not reports about particular people. Numbered citations identify the factual support for claims; they do not make every source complete or every conclusion certain. Public information can be incomplete, outdated, or difficult to compare, and a general explanation cannot determine what applies to your individual case. When a decision could affect you directly, check current details with the responsible agency or a qualified professional.

The Rules Around Your Kitchen Table

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

On a weekday morning, Lena is trying to get everyone out the door. A child can't find a permission slip. The bus is running late. A road crew has narrowed the street, and Lena's phone reminds her that a tax form still needs attention. Before breakfast is cleared, public decisions have brushed against the family's plans several times—not as grand speeches, but as schedules, rules, and services woven into an ordinary day.

Lena doesn't know who decided the bus route, which office handles the road work, or what rules shape the tax form. She also doesn't assume that every delay is a government failure, or that an official program will solve every household problem. She has more immediate questions: Who is responsible? Where can I check? What happens next?

Those are useful questions for anyone. Public decisions can feel distant when they arrive as paperwork or a change to a routine. But you can learn to trace the connection, one practical question at a time. The aim isn't to become an expert in every office. It's to see the shared rules around your table clearly enough to ask better questions—and to notice where the answers remain uncertain.

Start with the routine, not the institution

When people say “government,” they may picture a distant building, a campaign speech, or a stack of forms. Daily life offers a more useful starting point. Pick a routine: getting to work, taking a child to school, keeping a home warm, paying a bill, or finding care. Then notice the public decisions that may shape it. There could be a rule, a service, a tax, a benefit, or a public space involved. Sometimes there is more than one. Sometimes the connection is indirect.

This is not a hunt for someone to blame. A bus arriving late might have several causes. A school schedule may reflect decisions made in more than one place. A road repair can be inconvenient even when the work is meant to address a real need. You can recognize that public choices matter without deciding, in advance, that government is always helpful or always harmful.

Try a simple chain of questions. What happened in my routine? What rule or service might be connected? Who appears to run it? What information would confirm that? If your street is closed, for example, the first practical question might be which office posted the notice, not whether some distant level of government is responsible. If a tax form mentions a credit, the useful next step is to identify the credit and check its requirements.

The chain keeps your attention on what you can verify. It also makes room for other explanations. A change in your day may come from a public decision, a private choice, a local condition, or several things at once. Noticing a possible connection is a beginning, not a verdict.

Follow the rule to the person it reaches

A public decision can travel through several stages before it affects a household. Someone may set a goal; an elected body or agency may establish rules; funds may be assigned; and a service or payment may eventually reach a person. If you skip straight from the promise to the outcome, you can miss the details that explain why people experience the policy differently.

A tax credit makes this chain easier to see. The Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, is one example of a public policy that reaches households through tax returns. For 2023, 24.4 million taxpayers—15% of individual income tax filers—received \$65.3 billion in EITC payments. Families with children received 96% of the EITC dollars that year.¹ Those figures describe the scale and distribution of payments; they don't tell you whether a particular person qualifies or how much that person will receive.

Eligibility rules are part of the story, too. The IRS says the EITC is not counted as income when determining eligibility for or the amount of federally funded public benefits. If a recipient saves an EITC refund, it is excluded from resource limits for 12 months after receipt.¹ That detail shows how one policy can meet another: a tax refund and a benefits rule may both matter to the same household.

When you trace a decision, look for the handoff points. Who sets the rule? Who explains it? Who handles an application or payment? What has to be true for

the rule to apply? A promise can sound simple while its administration depends on conditions, documents, timing, or a person's circumstances. The closer you get to those details, the more useful your understanding becomes.

Ask which level or office is responsible

"The government" is a broad label, not an answer to a practical question. Public responsibilities are divided among federal, state, and local institutions, and agencies may carry out decisions made elsewhere. An elected official, a program office, and a court do different kinds of work. You don't need a complete civics map before you begin; you need a reliable way to locate the relevant office.

Start with the thing you are trying to understand. Is it a federal tax rule? A state-administered service? A local school or road question? These are starting categories, not guarantees about who has the final say. Use the official notice, website, or document connected to the issue to look for the agency name, the responsible office, and a contact route. If the first source points elsewhere, follow that referral and check that the next source addresses your actual question.

For broad benefit questions, USA Gov says its guide helps people explore benefits for themselves and their families and learn how to apply for benefits they are eligible to receive.² A starting guide can help you find a direction, but it is not a substitute for the rules of the agency responsible for a specific program. Once you find a program page, look for the program's own eligibility information and application instructions.

This step can spare you a lot of wandering. A page that looks official may be general, outdated, or meant for a different location. Read the name of the organization, the date, and the purpose of the page. Then ask: Does this source explain the decision I'm asking about, or merely point toward it? Good civic research often feels less like discovering one magic answer and more like following a paper trail with your eyes open.

Keep both the promise and the limits in view

A public service can help with one part of a problem while leaving another part untouched. A program may reach some people who need it and miss others. A rule can create a benefit and also require paperwork or trade-offs. Understanding this is not cynicism. It is a way to respect the difference

between what a policy intends, what it delivers, and what evidence can actually show.

Try separating three questions. First, what is the stated purpose? Second, what happened to the people or places covered by the evidence? Third, what important outcome was not measured, or did not change? This keeps a strong result from turning into a sweeping claim. It also keeps a disappointing result from erasing a benefit that was real but narrower than expected.

The same care applies at your kitchen table. A tax credit may matter to one household and not another. A school decision may affect families differently depending on their circumstances. A road change can benefit one trip while complicating another. You can ask who pays, who benefits, and who has to do extra work to get the benefit without pretending that the answers will always point in one direction.

The most useful conclusion may be modest: this policy appears to affect this part of daily life, under these conditions, according to this source. That is not a weak conclusion. It is a sturdy one. It gives you something you can explain, question, and revise when better information appears.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Research spotlight

A long-running housing study examined what happened when families moved from public housing to neighborhoods with lower poverty rates in five U.S. cities. The demonstration found that vouchers expanded access to lower-poverty neighborhoods where residents felt safer.⁵ But the findings were not a simple story of every outcome improving: moving did not reduce reliance on public assistance, improve economic outcomes, or improve children's educational attainment.⁵ That contrast is worth holding onto. A policy can change access to a place and produce a meaningful result without changing every measure researchers examine. The findings describe this study and its outcomes; they do not establish that every voucher program or every move will have the same effects. When you read a claim about a public decision, look for both the result and its boundaries. What changed? For whom? What stayed the same? That small pause can keep a hopeful finding from becoming a promise it never made.

A life example

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

A question at the end of the day

Lena, from the opening scene, has a quiet moment after dinner. She wants to understand a line on a tax document and whether it might matter to her household. The first search results mix general explanations with pages she doesn't recognize. Instead of guessing, she writes down the exact name of the credit and the question she needs answered: What are the eligibility rules, and where does an official source explain them?

She finds an official tax page, checks that it discusses the credit she has in mind, and reads the requirements rather than relying on a headline. One detail sends her to another page. That is mildly annoying, but at least she can see why: the first page was an overview, while the next one addresses the rule. She still has a question about her own circumstances, so she makes a note to contact the responsible office rather than treating a general explanation as personal advice.

Lena hasn't solved every question about taxes or public services. She has done something more manageable: separated a broad worry into steps, checked a source, and identified what remains unclear. The next time a public rule touches her routine, she has a method to start with. That kind of confidence is practical, not magical.

TRY THIS

Map one everyday connection

Choose one routine that matters to you and trace its public connection without assuming you already know the answer.

1. Write down the routine or moment you want to understand, such as a school notice, a road change, a tax form, or a service you use.
2. Describe what you directly observed, keeping interpretation separate from the event.
3. List one or two public rules, offices, or services that might be connected, and mark them as possibilities rather than facts.
4. Find an official source connected to the issue. Check who published it, what it covers, and whether it points to another responsible office.

5. Write down what you learned, what remains uncertain, and one next question you could ask.

Myths and honest truths

- **Myth:** If something affects my day, one government office must be responsible. **Truth:** A routine may be shaped by more than one public decision—or by factors outside government. Start by checking who handles the specific rule or service.
- **Myth:** If a policy has a good goal, it will produce the result it promises. **Truth:** Goals and outcomes are different. Look for what happened, who was included, and what the evidence does not establish.
- **Myth:** A general information page can tell me exactly what applies to my household. **Truth:** General guidance can help you find your way, but personal circumstances may require checking the responsible agency's rules or asking the agency directly.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Public decisions often show up as ordinary routines, rules, services, and paperwork.
- Noticing a connection is a starting point, not proof of who is responsible or what caused an outcome.
- Follow a policy from its purpose through its rules and delivery to the people it reaches.
- Check which office or level of government handles the specific question, using official sources.
- A useful account includes both what changed and what did not.

REFLECT

1. *What ordinary routine in your household might be shaped by a public rule or service?*
2. *When you encounter a claim about a policy, what would help you distinguish its goal from its measured results?*
3. *What is one public question you could make more manageable by identifying the responsible office?*

Nine more chapters are waiting

You've read the Introduction and Chapter 1. The full 92-page book continues with:

CH. 2 The Quiet Wonder of Shared Rules

CH. 3 Who Decides What

CH. 4 From Promise to Practice

CH. 5 Read the Public Numbers

CH. 6 Ask Better Questions

CH. 7 Participation Beyond Election Day

CH. 8 Trade-Offs in the Household Ledger

CH. 9 Avoid the Common Detours

CH. 10 A Civic Practice for the Long Run

Plus the research analysis "What the Evidence Says", a 30-day practice plan, a glossary, and every source with full research credits.

JOIN FREE OR GO INSIDER

Join the free Reader's Circle at shadeddiemongruebooksgallery.com to read the full book online, listen with AI reading mode in a man's or a woman's voice, and download the PDF. Want every shelf? Reserve an Insider membership.

Sources for these chapters

Numbers in the text (like ³) point to these sources. Every statistic, finding and documented example was copied from its source page, checked word for word against that page in October 2026, and is restated here in plain English. Figures can change as sources update. This book is for education and is not personal financial, legal, medical, mental-health, nursing, investment or other professional advice.

- 1 **Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.** *The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): How It Works and Who Receives It.* 2023. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R43805>
- 2 **USAGov.** *Find government benefits and financial help | USAGov.* <https://www.usa.gov/benefit-finder>
- 3 **National Bureau of Economic Research.** Katherine Baicker, Amy Finkelstein. *Oregon Health Insurance Experiment | NBER.* <https://www.nber.org/oregon>
- 4 **regulations.gov.** *Through Public Comment.* https://www.regulations.gov/assets/files/Public-Comment-on-Federal-Regulations_Final.pdf
- 5 **HUD USER.** *Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration Final Impacts Evaluation.* November 15, 2011. https://www.huduser.gov/portal/elist/2011-Nov15_3.html