



Presidential pork barrel politics with polarized voters

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ABSTRACT

Despite strong theoretical claims that politicians should target swing voters with distributive benefits, empirical evidence in the United States is inconclusive. This paper addresses the puzzle by focusing on two factors overlooked in previous work. First, I show that, owing to the bimodal distribution of partisanship among the U.S. public, swing voters can be targeted efficiently through the allocation of federal resources to areas where the opposition is strong. Secondly, I hypothesize that presidents limit swing-voter targeting to times when they are actually up for reelection; thus, the opposition county advantage appears only in first presidential terms. An analysis of the geographic distribution of federal project grants awarded between 1986 and 2009 supports the theory. Presidents target swing voters *within* competitive states; they do so only in the years when they seek reelection, however, and they channel benefits to counties where the opposition party maintains a stronghold.

1. Introduction

In the United States, the presidency is the only political office elected in a single national constituency, designed constitutionally on the logic that presidents should represent the nation at large rather than narrow partisan or parochial interests. The idea of “president of all the people” appears widely in presidential speeches, opinion polls, and civics textbooks (Wood, 2009). Scholars who stress presidential self-interest implicitly adopt the same belief. Presidents, they argue, pursue their policy agenda and aim to get reelected, just as other politicians do. They should therefore appeal to the median voter in order to maximize their political support (Downs, 1957). In the context of distributive politics, this perspective suggests that presidents act with a wider frame of reference in order to maximize the welfare of the entire constituency and to hinder parochial members of congress from serving the interests of local constituents at the expense of more general interests (Fitts & Imman, 1991; Lohmann & O'Halloran, 1994).

Yet, presidents also have both the incentive and the power to allocate federal resources in particularistic, targeted ways (McCarty, 2000; Nzelize, 2005; Wood, 2009). While the president represents a national constituency, some votes in presidential elections carry greater weight

than others. In particular, presidents in the U.S. are indirectly elected through the Electoral College, through which the plurality winner of each state's popular vote wins all the electors allotted for that state.¹ As a result, winning one vote in a battleground state is more valuable than winning one vote in a state in which a candidate is sure to win or lose. Presidents may target voters accordingly, allocating federal funds to voters with greater electoral leverage in order to maximize their chances of winning re-election (Hudak, 2014; Larcinese, Rizzo, & Testa, 2006).² In fact, U.S. voters reward presidents for federal spending at the ballot box, and the effect is greater in battleground states (Kriner & Reeves, 2012).³ At the same time, the president—as the party leader—has incentives to deliver disproportionate shares of federal largess to reward core constituents and/or to help co-partisan legislators (Berry, Burden, & Howell, 2010; Dynes & Huber, 2015; Galvin, 2009; Hamman & Cohen, 1997; Milkis, Rhodes, & Charnock, 2012).

Presidents have various means to achieve these goals. Their veto power enables them to reduce particularistic spending by the legislature and to use federal resources to address their own agendas (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1988; McCarty, 2000). Presidents also propose the budget, sign appropriations bills, and apportion budgetary resources for executive branch agencies. Congress establishes targets for total spending

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¹ U.S. Presidential elections are held every four years. A registered citizen votes for the members of the Electoral College, known as electors. These electors cast direct votes for President. There are a total of 538 electors, and a candidate who obtains more than 270 electors wins the presidency. In 48 states and Washington D.C., the winner of the states' popular vote receives all the electoral votes for that state. In Nebraska and Maine, electoral votes are split proportionally.

² Strategic allocation of resources for electoral benefit is well-documented in the electoral campaign literature (Bartels, 1985; Brams & Davis, 1974; Cox & Munger, 1989; Gimpel, Kaufmann, & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2007). Candidates spend more advertising funds and pay more visits to swing states even when an election is likely to be one-sided at the national level, as in 1972 (Nagler & Leighley, 1992) or in 2004 (Shaw, 2006).

³ In their analysis of the influence of federal grants on presidential elections, which this paper also examines, Kriner & Reeves (2012) demonstrate that a two-standard deviation increase in federal grants yields a 1.8% shift in the two-party vote in competitive states. According to their estimates, such a shift in the two-party vote in the 2004 election could have flipped nine states including Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

and receipts, the size of the deficit or surplus, and the debt limit at the aggregate level, but it often leaves decisions regarding the geographic distribution and scheduling of spending throughout a fiscal year to the executive branch. As [Arnold \(1979\)](#) notes, “most decisions about geographic allocations are bureaucratic decisions [p.8].” Thus, to the extent that a president succeeds in controlling the bureaucrats—via appointing like-minded officials at the top level of department management or exploiting centralized budgetary power within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—he maintains an important hand in the allocation of federal resources ([Kriner & Reeves, 2015](#)).

In view of this discretion, an extensive theoretical literature explores the choice of presidents to target swing versus core voters with distributive benefits, but the empirical evidence is inconclusive. This paper identifies two theoretical and empirical considerations that may explain the mixed success of the swing-voter models in existing studies. First, due to the difficulty in identifying swing voters at the individual level, existing empirical studies often rely on electoral competitiveness as a proxy for the number of swing voters, assuming that the underlying partisan distribution is unimodal (e.g., [Arulampalam, Dasgupta, Dhillon, & Dutta, 2009](#); [Banful, 2011](#); [Dahlberg & Johansson, 2002](#); [Kauder, Potrafke, & Reischmann, 2016](#); [Litschig, 2012](#)). Thus, the targeting of marginal voters should appear as a disproportionate allocation of resources to those areas. This assumption, however, does not fit the United States. The partisan distribution of voters in the U.S. is sharply bimodal, even in small areas like counties and congressional districts: most American voters are either Republican or Democratic partisans, and only a small portion can be labeled true independents. As I argue below, the bimodal distribution of the U.S. public radically alters the spending tactics of vote-maximizing incumbents. In short, more marginal voters reside in opposition strongholds than in areas with competitive races, so, at the aggregate level, incumbents should direct resources to opposition areas in order to target those marginal voters.

Secondly, presidents limit the targeting of swing voters to competitive states—given the nature of the Electoral College—and to times when they are actually up for reelection, namely, in their first term in office. As the leader of his party, a president needs to take care of his co-partisan members of Congress and of state governments ([Berry et al., 2010](#); [Dynes & Huber, 2015](#); [Galvin, 2009](#); [Hamman & Cohen, 1997](#); [Milkis et al., 2012](#)). He may also allocate resources in order to achieve his legislative agenda ([Grosseclose & Snyder, 1996](#)). These non-electoral goals suggest that presidents generally allot more resources to their core groups during off-election periods. When the demands of reelection surface, however, a president necessarily shifts attention to targeting marginal voters. Thus, we should observe a pattern of presidents targeting core voters when reelection is not an imminent concern, and swing voters when it is.

To address these overlooked considerations, I examine how a president allocates resources within states and how these patterns change according to both electoral competitiveness at the state level and election timing. In particular, I argue that targeting marginal voters should appear in the form of greater allocation to opposition counties, but that this opposition county advantage is realized only within competitive states and in the first presidential term. To test these claims, I employ data on federal grant spending at the county level between 1986 and 2009.⁴ The empirical analysis provides consistent evidence that opposition counties receive more per capita grant money than both core and competitive counties only under presidents seeking reelection. The opposition county advantages are absent during second presidential terms and in non-competitive states of a first-term president.

2. Theoretical argument

Whom should an incumbent target with government resources in order to optimize his electoral prospects? Conventional theoretical studies approach this question from two different perspectives, focusing on the importance of either core voters or swing voters. Among others, [Cox & McCubbins \(1986\)](#) argue that parties target core supporters because they understand how core supporters respond to spending better than how other voters do. On the other hand, [Lindbeck & Weibull \(1987\)](#) suggest that parties target swing voters who are ideologically indifferent to parties and who are thus more responsive to material incentives. In this model, to target core supporters is a waste of resources, since those voters have a strong predisposition to vote for one party regardless of material incentives. [Dixit & Londregan \(1995, 1996\)](#) suggest a unified framework in which the choice of targeting objectives is contingent upon a party's capacity to deliver goods to core constituents. Similar to [Lindbeck & Weibull \(1987\)](#), they argue that parties in general compete for political moderates whose votes are cheaply purchased with transfers. A constituency with more marginal voters, therefore, should receive more resources if parties aim to persuade swing voters with particularistic benefits. On the other hand, their model also predicts that parties allocate resources to core supporters when they have sufficient information about these voters' preferences so as to target transfers with few deadweight losses, which is consistent with [Cox & McCubbins \(1986\)](#).

Empirical tests of these theoretical models tend to be interpreted as favoring the swing voter model ([Golden & Min, 2013](#)). In contrast to the prediction that systems with proportional representation distribute resources via large-scale transfers rather than geographically targetable allocations ([Lizzeri & Persico, 2001](#); [Persson & Tabellini, 2003](#)), swing district advantages also appeared in countries with proportional systems such as Sweden ([Hammes & Nilsson, 2016](#); [Johansson, 2003](#)), Norway ([Helland & Sørensen, 2009](#)) and Australia ([Denemark, 2000](#)). Despite high party discipline and the limited capacity of individual legislators to procure funds and claim credit, the party cabinet has strong incentives to allocate government resources to pursue “the party's larger electoral imperative of an overall partisan victory” ([Denemark, 2000](#), p. 898).

Similarly, in the context of intergovernmental transfers, other studies suggest that the central government allots more resources to state, municipal or local governments where the races are close. In France, for example, [Cadot, Röller, & Stephan \(2006\)](#) show that regions where votes were evenly divided between the left-wing and right-wing coalitions received a greater share of transportation infrastructure investments. [Arulampalam et al. \(2009\)](#) also present evidence that swing states received higher transfers from the central government in India, and [Litschig \(2012\)](#) shows that municipalities with roughly equal right-wing and non-right-wing vote shares were targeted in the allocation of a formula-based government program in Brazil.

Evidence for swing constituency targeting is not limited to established democracies. [Kwon \(2005\)](#) suggests that more national subsidies were allotted to swing provinces in the period following democratic transition in South Korea. Similarly, [Veiga & Pinho \(2007\)](#) suggest that municipalities with close legislative elections were favored in the distribution process at least in the early years of democracy in Portugal, and [Case \(2001\)](#) argues that swing communes received greater block grants in Albania. [Rosenzweig \(2015\)](#) suggests that competitive districts enjoy greater access to local public goods even under dominant-party regimes such as Tanzania's, because the ruling party wishes to achieve and publicize an overwhelming electoral victory.

Evidence supporting the swing-voter model is also found in the United States. Studies suggest that electorally vulnerable districts receive a greater share of government funds both at the federal level ([Bickers & Stein, 1996](#); [Engstrom & Vanberg, 2010](#); [Stein & Bickers, 1994](#)) and the state level ([Herron & Theodos, 2004](#)). [Berry et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Kriner & Reeves \(2015\)](#) show that more federal grants are awarded

⁴ This paper uses the fiscal calendar year. An on-election year refers to the period between October of the pre-election year and September of the on-election year. I use the terms on-election year and pre-electoral period interchangeably.

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