



# The effects of earmarks on the likelihood of reelection

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## ABSTRACT

Many models predict that incumbent legislators use government spending – “pork barrel” spending – to increase their vote shares in elections. To date, however, evidence for this hypothesis is scarce. Using recently available data on the sponsorship of earmarks in U.S. appropriations legislation, this paper tests the effects of earmarks on the likelihood of legislators’ reelection. The results show that secured earmarks lead to higher vote shares. The analysis demonstrates that a \$10 million increase in earmarks leads to as much as a one percentage point increase in vote share on election day. Furthermore, the paper tests for voter responses to earmarks when earmarks have few or many sponsors.

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## 1. Introduction

Though many theoretical models in both economics and political science predict that incumbents increase their chances of reelection through pork-barrel spending (see Weingast, 1979; Shepsle and Weingast, 1981; Weingast et al., 1981; Niou and Ordeshook, 1985; Ferejohn and Krehbiel, 1987; Inman, 1988; Inman and Fitts, 1990; Bickers and Stein, 1996; Shepsle et al., 2002; and Keefer and Khemani, 2009), there is little evidence that delivering federal funds to home districts helps legislators to get reelected. This is surprising because securing federal funds for projects and activities that benefit the local constituency is an ongoing activity for many legislators. Nonetheless, evidence that delivering federal funds to home districts is an effective means to increase the chances of reelection has been elusive, even though members of Congress themselves believe that their reelection is likely determined by their success in obtaining federal funds for their districts (Mayhew, 1974). Additionally, Frisch and Kelly (2011) uncovered documentation in the papers of a former U.S. House Appropriations Committee member, Ralph Regula (R-OH), indicating that the leaders provide extra earmark funding depending on how much of a reelection challenge they face and their fellow Congressmen face. But the productivity of earmark spending is the subject of some academic dispute. Evans (2004, p. 32) reports that “whether pork-barrel benefits confer an electoral advantage is a matter of scholarly controversy.” This seems surprising given that Congressmen regularly announce to their voters that they secured funding for their home district and often have their name or picture (or both) on particular projects that they had sponsored in the district.<sup>1</sup> One wonders, if earmarks do not help reelection, why do Congressmen present to voters the securing of earmarks to the district as a legislative achievement?

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<sup>1</sup> For example in December 2009, Virginia Representative Connolly (VA 11) sent a six-page pamphlet to his constituents which included a detailed list of federal projects he secured for his district.

A number of studies find some evidence that federal spending in districts helps their incumbents' electoral prospects (Alvarez and Schousen, 1993; Levitt and Snyder, 1997), or primarily the prospects of Democratic incumbents (Alvarez and Saving, 1997; Cain et al., 1987; Sellers, 1997). Others find no evidence that federal spending improves incumbents' reelection outcomes (Feldman and Jondrow, 1984; Frisch, 1998; Stein and Bickers, 1995).

The data used in these studies lack the ability to associate the incumbent running for reelection with the federal spending that the incumbent secured in his or her district. Much of the federal expenditure going to congressional districts occurs without a particular legislator's direct action, because, for example, grants go to districts through the application of distribution formulas (Lee, 2003). Because formulas are set in law, it is difficult for legislators to take credit for securing these federal funds. Also, credit-taking is difficult for legislators for discretionary grants-in-aid funds, which are allocated through a bureaucratic grant application process. In contrast, earmarks are suited for claiming credit in re-election campaigns, when the legislators had to provide some effort to obtain earmarks for projects that are geographically targeted.

This raises a concern regarding the existing studies because they do not study explicitly the latter type of earmarks. Thus, the measure used for examining the effect of federal spending is not the measure voters may use if they wanted to reward an incumbent for additional spending that he or she brought to their district. This circumstance may explain why there is little evidence in the academic literature that pork barrel spending helps incumbents: voters may reward incumbents for the additional spending that incumbents secured, but not for federal spending which goes to the district without any effort expended by incumbents.

In this study I examine the effects of earmarks sponsored by U.S. House members on the sponsors' general election vote shares. Previous studies could not conduct such an examination because there was no comprehensive data base allowing them to identify the legislator responsible for the insertion of an earmark into a bill.<sup>2</sup> However, in January of 2007 the U.S. House of Representatives passed new disclosure rules, requiring disclosure of the identity of earmark sponsors. With this change in disclosure rules, data are available to examine whether sponsored earmarks are a determinant of electoral success.<sup>3</sup>

As House members cannot credibly claim credit for most spending flowing to their districts (Lee, 2003), representatives' best credit-claiming opportunities lie in earmarked projects. For voters to reward incumbents for federal spending in the district, voters require knowledge about whether they can attribute additional spending to their Representative. Earmarked projects are a means for Representatives to inform voters about their success in directing funding to home districts, because these projects specify the geographical area of the funds' distribution and direct funds without additional intermediation, as earmarks. If voters reward incumbents for funds that the incumbents sought for their districts – rather than federal funds generally – then Representatives have a strong incentive to create earmarks for district-specific projects, since such action allows incumbents to claim credit (Mayhew, 1974).

Testing for this relationship between earmarks and vote shares, however, presents an obvious challenge: legislators who are, or expect to be in very competitive races may exert extra effort to secure earmarks, with the goal of improving their electoral prospects and avoiding defeat. Thus incumbents in tight races may receive more federal spending than those facing less challenging electoral prospects, leading to a negative correlation between earmarks and vote shares, and biasing the estimated coefficient on earmarks downward. I address this issue by using the malapportionment in the U.S. Senate and by using Senate Appropriations Committee membership as instruments for earmarks.

Malapportionment in the U.S. Senate leads to an overrepresentation of small states in the Senate, but not in the U.S. House, where each member represents roughly the same number of people. The number of earmarks a Representative can secure for his district is determined in part by whether a U.S. Senator from their state will support the proposed earmark. Due to malapportionment in the U.S. Senate, that is the unequal representation of states relative to their population size, a small state bias benefits voters from those states (see, for example, Lee and Oppenheimer, 1997; Knight, 2008). This bias also makes it more likely that proposed earmarks from a small-state Representative are included in the final bill. It is more likely because members of the conference committee decide on the final version of the appropriations bill and members of this committee are U.S. Senators and Representatives. Members of both chambers of Congress jointly make the final decisions on which earmarks to include and to exclude in the final appropriations bill. Thus, influence of U.S. Senators, stemming from malapportionment, in part determines whether House members have their sponsored earmarks included in the passed legislation. Therefore the degree of malapportionment, as measured by state population size, is one of the instruments for earmarks. The other Senate-based instrument is whether the state is represented by a Senator who is also a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. U.S. Senators on this committee have a large influence over which proposed earmarks are included in the final bill. Therefore, I use membership on the Senate Appropriations Committee as a second instrument for earmarks.

An advantage of these Senate-based instruments is that they are unlikely to influence the reelection prospects of Representatives. U.S. House Appropriations Committee membership, for example, is not a suitable instrument if voters value having their Representative be a member of that committee and thus cast a ballot for him or her.

The instrumental variable regression results show that earmarked spending increases incumbents' vote shares. The productivity of earmarks with respect to generating votes for incumbents tends to be greater, the more voters can attribute spending to their incumbent, and the more spending is targeted to the incumbent's congressional district.

<sup>2</sup> Lee (2003) and Balla et al. (2002) attribute earmarks to particular House members, but do not study the impact of earmarks on vote shares. Similarly, Evans (2004) attributes some earmarks to specific House members.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to this date, information on earmarks could have been collected from the political advertisements that incumbents send to voters, which often include a listing of the earmarks they obtained. However, there is no depository of such advertisements which would allow a compilation of those data.

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