Distributive Politics: Federal Outlays

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Abstract

We provide an interpretive review of theoretical and empirical research on the distribution of federal outlays in the United States and their political antecedents. We argue that the foundational scholarly research on the subject to date can be classified to a great extent according to the perspectives it takes respecting legislative organization, political parties, and the executive branch. After reviewing theoretical and empirical research in these areas, we discuss some cutting-edge research in this area of research. One of the most exciting trends in the study of distributive politics is a much greater focus on issues of causal identification in empirical tests of theories concerning the allocation of federal resources. Finally, we describe five questions that we believe ought to motivate future research in this area. These questions concern the relationship between entitlement and discretionary spending; how to integrate research on distributive politics with research on political business cycles; how best to measure executive discretion in specific assistance programs; how to understand the relationship between spending in an area and support for that spending; and how to capture the mechanism relating spending and electoral benefits.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the federal government spent about $11,600 per citizen, or roughly 23% of the US gross domestic product. While the governments of many developed countries spend more per capita [even once one accounts for state and local expenditures, the United States still ranks 14th among OECD countries (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011)], the sheer enormity of federal outlays—totaling $3.6 trillion in 2012—makes their allocation a ripe subject for systematic analysis.

To what extent are federal expenditures in the United States allocated on the basis of political considerations? More specifically, what are those considerations, and how do US political institutions moderate or exacerbate their application? This essay is a reflection on scholarly inquiry into these subjects. We first review some of the foundational research on the subject. We argue that to a great extent, scholarly work can be classified according to the perspective it takes on (i) legislative organization; (ii) political parties; and

(iii) executive power. After reviewing some of the key findings in this literature, we proceed to a discussion of some cutting-edge areas of research. In particular, we focus on how empirical scholars studying distributive politics in the United States have become much more attuned to issues of research design and *causal identification*. We conclude by identifying some key issues that future scholars working in this area will need to grapple with.

Following Lowi's (1964) famous typology, we take a signature feature of distributive policies to be divisibility: namely, the ease with which policy choices "can be disaggregated and dispensed unit by small unit" (p. 690). Accordingly, in what follows we will focus on the political economy of discretionary domestic spending rather than entitlement spending; whether the discretion lies with Congress or the executive branch will be a critical issue in our discussion.

A BRIEF PRIMER ON FEDERAL SPENDING

It is important to define the object under scrutiny before proceeding to a discussion of how it has been studied. A full consideration of government spending in the United States is far beyond the scope of this short essay. However, understanding how expenditures are allocated requires some basic knowledge about the federal budget. At the most basic level of aggregation, federal expenditures may be divided into three categories: discretionary expenditures, mandatory expenditures, and interest payments on the national debt. Mandatory expenditures are programs such as Social Security and Medicare, the funding for which is provided for by standing law and not subject to the recurrent budgeting process. Discretionary spending, which itself may be divided into defense and nonrelated areas, is decided on during the annual appropriation process. Table 1 displays amounts (in billions of nominal dollars) associated with these major categories.

In addition to funding the operation of government agencies, a large fraction of the discretionary budget goes to fund federal domestic assistance programs; these include grants, direct payments, insurance programs, loans

Table 1
Federal Spending by Category, Fiscal Year 2012

Category	Amount ($Billions)
Nondefense discretionary	615.6
Defense-related discretionary	670.5
Mandatory	2134.2
Net interest	220.4

Source: Office of Management and Budget, Historical Table 8.1.

and loan guarantees. The recipients of these benefits might be private individuals, companies, or institutions (e.g., universities and other nonprofits); alternatively, the recipients may be states or local governments. $155.7 billion went to nonmilitary contracts in 2012, and $361.3 billion to military contracts (source: usaspending.gov).

A critical feature of these categories of spending is the delegation of authority to agencies in the executive branch. Federal agencies differ markedly in the degree of effective discretion they possess in disbursing funds—whether to individuals and private organizations or to state and local governments. For certain programs, Congress specifies the amounts and recipients in statutory formulae—witness, for example, the formulas governing price supports for agricultural commodities. For others, Congress grants a much greater degree of discretion to the agency administering the program: grants from the National Institutes of Health; mortgage insurance from the Federal Housing Administration; or Homeland Security grants to states and localities, for example. Finally, "earmarks" are directives from Congress to an executive branch agency to spend its nominally discretionary budget in specific ways. While some such directives lie in statutes, legislators may place others in committee or conference reports.

FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS AND RESEARCH

Legislative Institutions

As noted in the introduction to this essay, much of the early research on distributive politics in the United States is Congress-centered (not surprising given Congress's spending power as defined in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution), and focused in particular on the historically decentralized nature of the legislative process in the United States.

The modern study of distributive politics in the United States can be traced to progress in the institutional analysis of Congress in the 1960s. Fenno's landmark (1966) study of Congressional Appropriations, *The Power of the Purse,* put the focus of studies of legislative behavior squarely on Congress's spending power and in particular on the House Appropriations Committee. Polsby (1968) described the emergence of universalistic norms in the House of Representatives: most critically, how the discretion of the Speaker of the House in selecting committee chairs had been supplanted by reliance on a seniority norm. Mayhew (1974) argued for the importance of the committee system in allowing reelection-minded legislators to take positions on, and claim credit for, particularistic policies benefiting their respective constituencies. In addition, Ferejohn's (1974) exhaustive study of federally funded local water projects related the allocation of those projects to the

institutional position of legislators and their resultant influence over the Army Corps of Engineers. A series of rational choice accounts of legislative institutions have placed the substantive intuitions of these earlier works on firm analytical foundations (e.g., Shepsle & Weingast, 1981; Weingast & Marshall, 1988).

Three clusters of hypotheses emerge from this theoretical literature. First, we should not expect federal largesse to be concentrated in a minimum winning coalition. This is overwhelmingly confirmed in the data.

Second, we should see a relationship between pork barrel spending in a legislator's district or state and his or her positions in key committee posts and/or seniority. The empirical record on the committee membership hypothesis is mixed. Recent research confirming the importance of committee positions for at least some committees includes work by Alvarez and Saving (1997); Engstrom and Vanberg (2010); and Lauderdale (2008). Research failing to confirm the committee membership hypothesis includes work by Evans (2004). With regard to the seniority hypothesis, two mechanisms may be at play: access to committee leadership (Roberts, 1990; but see Arnold, 1979), and increased skill in the legislative process (Engstrom & Vanberg, 2010; Sobel & Ryan, 2012; but see Anzia & Berry, 2011; and Lauderdale, 2008).

Third, to the extent that legislators can devote only so much effort to bringing home the bacon, more legislators per citizen in a state or district (brought about either by fixed representation of states in the senate or malapportionment in the House) should give rise to greater expenditures in that area (e.g., Lee, 2000).

Political Parties

The literature referenced above tends to deemphasize the role of party. However, to the extent that the majority enjoys controls over the legislative agenda, this advantage should engender advantages in the allocation of federal resources. A number of studies present evidence that voters represented by members of a majority party receive more benefits than those represented by members of a minority party (e.g., Albouy, 2013; Balla, Lawrence, & Maltzman, & Sigelman, 2002; Berry, Burden, & Howell, 2010).

A related body of theoretical research, less focused on the United States specifically, seeks to make general claims about how strong parties might target government transfers for political benefit. In the model described by Cox and McCubbins (1986), a risk-averse incumbent party has incentives to direct transfers primarily toward *core supporters,* in order to maintain its existing electoral coalition. By contrast, Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) describe a model of two-party competition in which, in equilibrium, both parties primarily target *marginal constituencies* (in their setup, middle-income voters) rather than

core supporters (low-income voters for one party and high income voters for the other). In the more general setup of Dixit and Londregan (1995, 1996), parties tradeoff between the electoral benefits of targeting pivotal constituencies and of satisfying core groups of supporters. Asymmetries between the parties in the efficiency with which they can target certain groups push the parties away from targeting marginal and toward core voters.

Both the core and swing voter models can claim their share of empirical support. Evidence for core voter models often overlaps with evidence for the majority party advantage because the distribution of core voters is measured with levels of support in the previous election, which is correlated with majority party status (Balla *et al.*, 2002; Levitt & Snyder, 1995; see also Dynes & Huber, 2013). On the other hand, Bickers and Stein (1996) suggest that incumbents elected in open seat races receive more federal spending. Other scholars have found evidence that at least some subsets of incumbents who won with close margins tend to bring home more federal resources to their districts (e.g., Berry *et al.*, 2010; Lazarus, 2009; Stein & Bickers, 1994).

THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

Most recently, scholars have begun to include the executive branch more explicitly in theoretical models of distributive politics. Kiewiet and McCubbins (1988) argue that a presidential veto threat is only credible in changing spending on distributive programs if the president prefers less spending than the legislature. McCarty (2000) develops a model in which the presidential veto can reduce spending *unless the president himself has strong preferences over its distribution.* To the extent that the president's electoral prospects depend on delivering benefits to (core or marginal) constituents, he may have good reason to behave in the ways predicted by the models described above.

To the extent that a president's goals are distributive, politicization might thus facilitate presidential influence in the allocation of discretionary federal expenditures. What, then, should that influence look like? A president is likely to benefit from directing resources to copartisan legislators and other officials, either in exchange for their support on legislative initiatives or to enhance their electoral prospects. Berry *et al.* (2010), for example, demonstrate that legislative districts and counties represented by copartisan legislators of presidents receive significantly more federal spending.

The president seeks reelection and to preserve his party's control of the White House. Therefore, he and his subordinates have an incentive to allocate federal resources toward that end. Demonstrating what this means in practice has led to mixed results empirically. Studies on New Deal spending have found that states with more voting variability received more federal employment and agricultural aid (e.g., Wright, 1974). Hudak (2014) also

shows that presidents direct more discretionary grants to swing states, especially in advance of presidential elections. In general, however, the strength of empirical support for the swing voter model is weak in studies on the distribution of federal resources. Both Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2008) and Berry *et al*. (2010) find that swing states do not receive more federal outlays. On the other hand, these studies find a positive and significant association between the levels of support for the president and the allocation of federal resources at the state level.

In his seminal work on congressional-bureaucratic relations, Arnold (1979) notes that "most decisions about geographic allocations are bureaucratic decisions" (p. 8). Despite this authority, bureaucrats have an incentive to consider preferences of other political actors to accomplish their own goals (see also Maass, 1950). For example, bureaucrats have an incentive to consider preferences of members of Congress because attaining budgetary stability and growth depends on their decisions. Similarly, Stein and Bickers (1997) claim that concerns about budgets induce bureaucrats to help not only legislators but also constituents and interest groups. Bureaucrats also have an incentive to respond to the president's political needs to obtain presidential support (Hudak, 2014).

Obtaining empirical evidence on whether, and to what extent, bureaucrats allocate federal resources in response to the demands of other political officials is challenging, both because those potential influences are many and because it is difficult to tell the degree to which apparently politicized allocations reflect discretionary bureaucratic actions as opposed to being hardwired into enabling statutes or directed from the White House. With this in mind, Bertelli and Grose (2009) find that a greater degree of ideological congruence between a state's senators and the Secretaries of Defense and Labor is associated with greater discretionary allocations (in the form of contracts and grants) to the senators' respective states. The congruence of the senators and the president has no apparent effect, however. They interpret these findings as implying an autonomous sphere of bureaucratic influence. Gordon (2011) demonstrates a linkage between White House directives to political appointees at the General Services Administration and the allocation of subsequent building contracts.

AREAS OF CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

We now turn to some recent developments in the study of the distributive politics of federal outlays. In our estimation the key development in the literature over the past decade or so has been a greater focus on causal identification. In an ideal world, we could test our hypotheses about distributive politics by randomly assigning political significance across districts and

observing differences in spending outcomes. In the real world, of course, such experimental manipulations are impossible. For an observed relationship between spending in a district or state and the hypothesized measure of its political significance to be interpreted as a causal, it must be the case that, the status of a district as important or unimportant is as good as randomly assigned once one conditions on other observable characteristics of districts. Otherwise, it could be the case that the measure of influence is proxying the effect of some unobservable, politically neutral feature of the district.

For example, suppose we observe that districts whose legislators sit on the Appropriations subcommittee overseeing the Department of Housing and Urban Development receive a disproportionate share of housing grants. Is this bureaucratic deference to those legislators? Possibly, but it could simply reflect the member's self-selection onto that committee owing to the large number of eligible beneficiaries in her district. The analyst, hoping to eliminate this possibility, controls for an observable measure of district-level demand: for example, percent urban in the district. How sure can we be that this fully neutralizes the bias? Studies of the effects of malapportionment suffer from a similar issue: perhaps greater per capita spending in Alaska and Montana is a consequence of diseconomies of scale in providing comparable levels of services to widely dispersed populations (Elis, Malhotra, & Meredith, 2009), and not the greater effort or pivotality of their senators. Unfortunately, nearly all of the empirical studies of distributive politics described in the previous section are susceptible to this criticism.

Because scholars cannot randomly assign political significance as in an experiment, scholars have recently turned to innovative research designs to minimize the ubiquitous threat of confounding. One type of design exploits the panel structure of expenditure data and examines repeated observations of the same districts. The presence of multiple observations on the same cross-sectional unit (district or state) allows the analyst to implicitly control for all observable *and unobservable* time invariant features of congressional districts over their lifespans, as well as year-to-year variation in spending levels. The basic idea is that rather than compare spending in districts that differ in their observable political characteristics (i.e., "between" district variation), the analyst examines the effect of *changes* in the political status of specific districts on spending ("within" district variation), and then averages across the many districts that observe a change. This is the approach taken in a recent papers by Berry *et al*. (2010), who demonstrate a relationship between spending in a district and whether the district is represented by a copartisan of the president; and by Anzia and Berry (2011), who demonstrate that female legislators are more successful at securing federal expenditures in their districts than their male counterparts.

Second, regression discontinuity designs exploit the fact that the assignment of the "treatment" of political importance may be a consequence of whether some continuous measure falls above or below some exogenously given threshold; the analyst then compares the outcomes of observations falling on both sides of the threshold, under the assumption that in that vicinity, treatment assignment is effectively random. Albouy (2013) takes this approach in estimating the effect on various categories of spending of having a Republican or Democratic legislator, focusing on candidates who won elections by small margins (i.e., those close to the 50% threshold). Anzia and Berry (2011) also perform a regression discontinuity analysis to isolate the effect of female legislators.

A third approach is to exploit some natural experiment provided by a plausibly exogenous shock to district-level circumstances, often in conjunction with a panel data structure. Elis, Malhotra, and Meredith (2009), for example, employ the discrete changes in representation created by the decennial census reapportionment process to estimate the effect of changes in congressional delegation size on federal outlays. In addition, Gordon (2011) exploits a minor scandal occurring during the presidency of George W. Bush: a White House deputy was found to have given a presentation to political appointees at the General Services Administration mentioning priority congressional districts for the upcoming election. By comparing GSA spending in the mentioned and unmentioned districts in the weeks immediately before and following the briefing, Gordon recovers an estimate of the effect of a White House directive to bureaucrats on subsequent spending.

KEY ISSUES GOING FORWARD

We conclude by identifying five key issues in the study of the politics of federal outlays.

How do the Politics of Discretionary Expenditures Change when a Decreasing Fraction of the Federal Budget is Discretionary?

Two facts—an aging population and dramatic increases in health care costs—have led to an explosion in the fraction of federal expenditures devoted to entitlements. Figure 1 displays this trend graphically: whereas in 1900, less than 1% of the budget was devoted to welfare, pensions, or healthcare. By 2012 that number had spiked to nearly 60%.

In considering this picture, it is important to point out that discretionary spending as a fraction of GDP has remain largely unchanged. However, the fact that it constitutes a decreasing fraction of overall expenditures means the *role* of discretionary expenditures in American politics may change. As
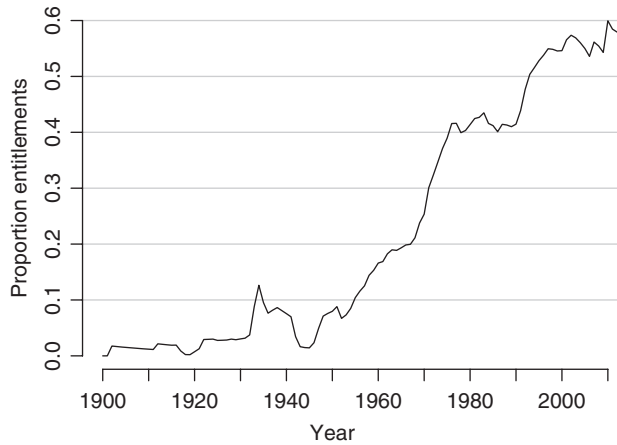
Figure 1   The fraction of federal expenditures devoted to entitlement spending has increased dramatically in the last century. *Source*: Budget data compiled by usgovernmentspending.com

documented by Poole and Rosenthal (2007), in the past 30–40 years it has become increasingly easy to describe political conflict within Congress as occurring on a single "left-right" dimension, where that dimension captures partisan conflict or disagreement about redistributive policies, for example, entitlements. Moreover, the ideological distance between the two parties has increased over this period. Historically, pork barrel spending provided a means to "grease the wheels" of legislative bargaining by permitting congressional leaders to buy off reluctant coalition members (Evans, 2004). As legislative gridlock over budgetary and entitlement reform appears increasingly inexorable, however, the amount of distributive largesse required to overcome a legislator's ideological inclinations on the main issues of the day is likely to increase. If reform is sufficiently important, this could increase in the importance of pork in fashioning coalitions; however, if the cost of pork is prohibitive, that could conceivably produce a decrease in its importance.

D<small>O THE</small> P<small>OLITICAL</small> I<small>NCENTIVES</small> G<small>OVERNING THE</small> A<small>LLOCATION OF</small> F<small>EDERAL</small> E<small>XPENDITURES</small> V<small>ARY</small> D<small>YNAMICALLY</small>?

As Harold Lasswell famously argued in 1936, politics is about "who gets what, when, and how". The studies on distributive politics cited here generally focuses on the "what." Starting with Nordhaus (1975), a related literature on political businesses cycles (PBCs); addresses the "when," focusing on temporal variation in aggregate government expenditures before and

after election. Both literatures have a common interest in understanding how an incumbent might use government resources for electoral ends. Owing to the independent development of each literature, however, the possibility of dynamic changes in the allocation of discretionary spending has received little attention so far.

Keech and Pak (1989) and Mayer (1995) examine whether Veteran's transfers or military contracts increase in the preelectoral period respectively. Keech and Pak (1989) fail to find confirmatory evidence for budget expansion On the other hand, Mayer (1995) shows that the number of civilian agency contract awards rapidly increases just before presidential elections and primaries.

Kang (2014), on the other hand, examines the possibility that main beneficiaries of government spending vary with electoral cycles. An opportunistic incumbent often needs support of swing voters to win an election, which provides him with an incentive to target these voters before elections. Once winning an election, however, he has various motivations to cater to his core constituents.

Is There a Principled Way to Quantify Executive Discretion Over Expenditures?

As of May 2013, the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance describes 2233 federal assistance programs. As noted above, the amount of effective discretion that presidents possess in administering these programs varies markedly. Levitt and Snyder (1995) argue that programs with geographically concentrated benefits are more easily targeted than ones with diffuse benefits: they calculate coefficients of variation for each program using district averages, and classify programs as having low or high variation. The former include entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Veterans' Benefits. The latter include the lion's share of discretionary programs. Anzia and Berry (2011) and Berry *et al*. (2010) also use the coefficient of variation methodology.

This approach represents an important first step, but has important limitations. While the allocation of entitlement spending has distributive consequences, it is difficult to argue that in the short to medium term that its allocation reflects tactical political choices of entrepreneurial politicians (as opposed to, e.g., demographic changes). Moreover, this approach does not capture institutional constraints on discretion: as noted above, an agricultural subsidy program may have a high coefficient of variation, but it does not afford the kind of discretion to the Department of Agriculture that, for example, the ability to lease, operate, and renovate buildings affords to the General Services Administration.

Codifying the residual discretion for individual assistance programs in a systematic manner that takes account of, inter alia, statutory constraints on discretion, the degree to which the program is insulated via staffing or position in the bureaucratic hierarchy from overhead political control, promises to be an enormous undertaking. However, it is one well worth pursuing. Recent theoretical research (Ting, 2012) describes conditions under which Congress will delegate funding choices to professionalized bureaucrats rather than bargain directly over distribution. To the extent that political scientists wish to subject his argument to care empirical scrutiny, or, more broadly, to refine arguments about *which* government expenditures are most likely to respond to the various political stimuli described above, this undertaking would seem to represent a critical step.

Why are States that are Net Recipients of Federal Largesse the most Hostile to Government Spending?

Lacy (2009) observes an intriguing statistical relationship: states that vote Republican in presidential elections, and thus might be expected to have the greatest hostility to federal spending, tend to be net recipients of federal dollars, whereas states that tend to vote Democratic tend to be net providers; moreover, this relationship appears to be increasing over time. What is the relationship between distributive and ideological politics? Endeavoring to answer this question would be a fruitful line of future research.

Can Our Empirical Analysis Better Flesh Out the Mechanism Relating Political Expenditure with Electoral Benefit?

Cox (2009) notes the importance of distinguishing between distributive spending on swing *groups of voters* on the one hand and swing *districts* on the other. Suppose, for example, that a party wanted to maximize its majority in the legislature. Such a party would do well to target expenditures toward swing districts. However, within those districts, whether that party should target swing or core voters depends on the mechanism relating political expenditures with electoral benefits. The "swing voter model" cited above relies on the idea that pivotal voters will be persuaded by distributive largesse to support the candidate credited with providing it. By contrast, the "core voter" model relies on a logic of mobilization (getting the base to turn out and contribute to a campaign) and coordination (reducing the number of internecine competitors, e.g., primary challengers).

If persuasion within a district is more critical than persuasion, then we would expect to see swing voters in swing districts targeted; if, on the other hand, mobilization and coordination were critical, we would expect to see

core voters in swing districts targeted. In the absence of microlevel data on individual recipients of federal assistance and their voting histories, one possible approach to pinning down the preponderant mechanism would be to disaggregate spending by discretionary program where the ideological affinities of groups of voters are well known. For example, do we see a disproportionate number of small business loans flowing to swing districts under Republican administrations?

Even if the core-voter-in-swing-district hypothesis receives support, this is still not the end of the story. It is possible, for example, that legislators seek pork barrel spending in their districts to claim credit among voters (Mayhew, 1974). However, it is also possible, if not likely, that spending is a way of mobilizing *elites* within a district to support an incumbent. To our knowledge, to date only Mebane and Wawro (2002) have investigated this specific question, although Gordon (2011) argues that the elite mechanism is more plausible for most GSA public building contracts, owing to their low visibility.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have endeavored to describe the past, present, and, it is to be hoped, future of empirical and theoretical research on the distribution of federal outlays. In contextualizing past, foundational research, it is helpful to see this research as echoing advances in the study of US political institutions. Earlier research has focused in particular on the relationship between legislative organization and distribution, while more recent research has revitalized the critical role played by political parties, the president, and the bureaucracy. We have argued that some of the most exciting contemporary research on distributive politics in the United States is centrally concerned with employing innovative research designs to improve causal identification. In addition, lastly, we have identified a number of useful unanswered questions that future scholars working in the area might seek to answer. These questions concern the relationship between entitlement and discretionary spending; how to integrate research on distributive politics with research on political business cycles; how best to measure executive discretion in specific assistance programs; how to understand the relationship between spending in an area and support for that spending; and how to capture the mechanism relating spending and electoral benefits.

Of course, this list of topics is necessarily incomplete. We hope that scholars working in the area will expand it, and in so doing, match the creativity associated with asking new questions about the subject with intellectual rigor in answering them.

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