

Distributive Politics, Presidential Particularism, and War

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September 26, 2017

Abstract

American presidents are the only officials elected by a national constituency — a fact presidents routinely emphasize and which motivates calls for institutional reforms to delegate more authority to the president. A more recent perspective, however, argues that presidents disproportionately direct federal resources to valuable electoral and favored partisan constituencies. We argue that particularism varies across political contexts, with presidents having less incentive to favor particularistic goals when national interests are at stake. We test our argument using county-level data on defense contracts issued by the War Production Board during World War II. Consistent with our argument, we find no evidence of presidential particularism; instead, defense contracts were largely concentrated in areas based on the availability of infrastructure. Our findings raise questions about the conditions under which presidents balance their electoral and partisan incentives against their role as the chief steward of the national interest.

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Presidents dating back at least to Andrew Jackson have emphasized their unique position as the only official elected by a national constituency. This basic fact, presidents have argued, should lead Congress to look favorably upon the presidents' policy goals. As the most ardent defenders of this perspective write, "presidents are truly national leaders with national constituencies who think in national terms about national problems—and they are far less likely than legislators to become captive to narrow or local special-interest pressures" (Howell and Moe 2016, xvi).

Recent scholarship offers an alternative perspective, however, in which presidents are theorized as *particularistic* while falling short of the universalism articulated by Jackson. The particularistic perspective emphasizes presidents' partisan and electoral incentives to disproportionately target federal resources to preferred constituencies (e.g., Kriner and Reeves 2015). A growing body of research documents the apparent influence of presidential particularism on the distribution of federal grants, trade policy, military base closings, and disaster declarations (see, e.g., Kriner and Reeves 2015; Lowande, Jenkins and Clarke Forthcoming). Findings from this research have motivated further research on particularism among chief executives in U.S. states (Nicholson-Crotty 2015) and other presidential systems (Kang 2015) while raising questions about the capacity for presidents to advance the national interest despite their particularistic incentives.

In this paper, we argue that presidents' incentives to engage in particularism vary across political context. Specifically, we argue that presidents have less incentive to distribute federal resources to favor particularistic goals when national priorities are at stake. We test our argument in the context of defense contracts issued by the War Production Board during World War II. Using data on the county-level contracts awarded between 1941 and 1945, we find no evidence of presidential particularism. Across a range of models, we find no evidence that the distribution of federal contracts varied across counties and states based on their value in the Electoral College and only limited evidence that constituencies represented by the presidents' congressional co-partisans were disproportionate recipients of federal contracts. Instead, defense contracts were largely concentrated in areas based on the availability of infrastructure. While presidents may

consider electoral and partisan incentives when directing government activity, our findings suggest that the salience of these incentives varies across political context. The results further suggest the need for additional theorizing about the conditions under which presidents balance electoral and partisan incentives against their role as the chief steward of the national interest.

Presidential Particularism and Political Context

Scholars have long posited fundamental distinctions between presidents and legislators on the basis of their different constituencies and time horizons.¹ Presidents are elected by the nation as a whole, while legislators are elected by geographic constituencies. As such, presidents are believed to pursue policy goals that serve the entire nation while members of Congress have incentives to focus on whether a particular policy initiative advances their constituents' parochial interests. Moreover, because presidents are limited to two four-year terms while legislators pursue re-election nearly constantly, presidents are better-positioned to advance policies that will serve the nation's interests over the long term and cement their places in history. Based on this argument, presidents, political scientists, and legal scholars have argued for endowing the president with greater policymaking and administrative authority to overcome Congress's tendency toward gridlock and inefficiency.

This perspective is challenged by more recent research which argues that presidents' partisan and electoral incentives encourage presidents to favor some constituencies over others. These incentives lead presidents to direct federal resources to key partisan and electoral constituencies, resulting in, for instance, the disproportionate distribution of federal grants to districts represented by the president's congressional copartisans (Berry, Burden and Howell 2010) and to states that are more valuable in the Electoral College (Kriner and Reeves 2015). Incentives for presidential particularism appear to have been in place since at least the late nineteenth and early twentieth

¹See Howell and Moe (2016) and Kagan (2001) for discussion of this perspective.

centuries, leading scholars to conclude that “the American presidency may fall well short of a normatively appealing, nationally representative Executive – loyal only to the public interest” (Lowande, Jenkins and Clarke Forthcoming, 1).

We argue that the universalistic-particularistic dichotomy is too stark. While presidents may perceive (and act upon) particularistic incentives in many areas of governance, the salience of these incentives is likely to vary across political contexts. They must balance their partisan and electoral goals against their responsibility to guard the national interest and their legacies. From the perspective of advancing the national good, for instance, it makes comparatively little difference whether \$100 million in grant funding is awarded to constituents in electorally valuable states or is more evenly distributed across the country. But when the salience of the national interest increases, we argue, particularistic incentives recede in importance.² We test our argument in the context of war, when national interests are paramount and in which we expect to observe little evidence that presidents prioritize partisan and electoral interests.

Data

We test our argument using data on the county-level provision of defense supplies and facilities contracts awarded during World War II. These data were published by the Civilian Production Administration (which superseded the War Production Board in 1946) in the *Alphabetical Listing of Major War Supply Contracts* and were reported in the 1947 County Data Book issued by the Census. The data include the total dollar amounts of all contracts larger than \$50,000.³ The contracts were awarded by the War Production Board (WPB), which President Roosevelt established via Executive Order 9024 in January 1942 and superseded the Supply Priorities and Allocation

²This argument borrows from the model offered by Howell, Jackman and Rogowski (2013).

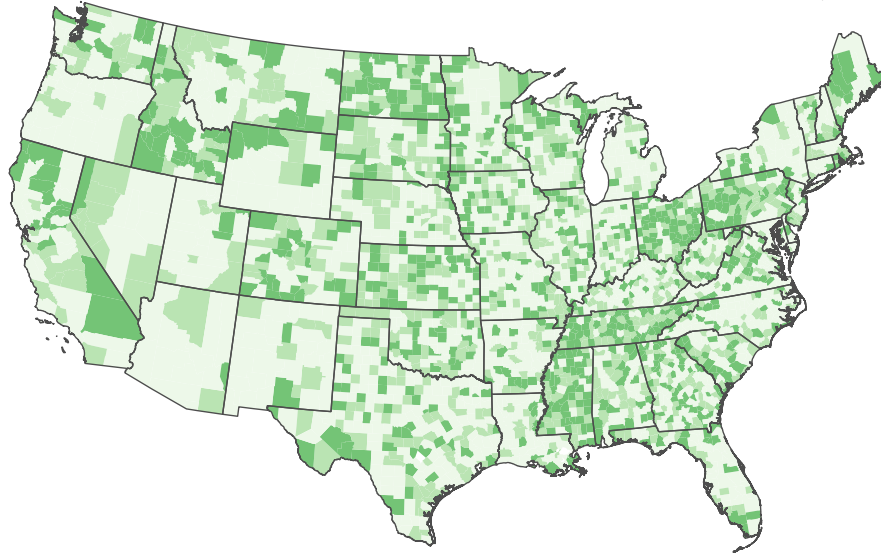
³Unfortunately, data for contracts of smaller dollar amounts or on the total number of contracts are not available.

Board. The WPB was housed within the Executive Office of the President and was comprised of several cabinet secretaries and executive branch administrators with its Chair appointed solely by the President. The WPB was responsible for directing the war production and procurement program. President Roosevelt's 1943 State of the Union address to Congress lauded the WPB's efforts in its first year to mobilize the manufacture of 48,000 planes ("more than the airplane production of Germany, Italy, and Japan put together"), 56,000 combat vehicles, 670,000 machine guns, and 181 million rounds of artillery ammunition ("ten times greater than our total production in the first World War"). In addition to the "unprecedented production" of military supplies, the WPB's activities also resulted in no less than "sweeping transformations" in the nation's "entire economic structure and fundamental changes in the government itself" (United States Civilian Production Administration 1947, xiii).

Figure 1 displays the distribution of defense contracts during World War II. The mean county received about \$755,000 (in 2017 dollars) with a standard deviation of \$4.8 million. The map shows no clear geographic pattern of the concentration of defense contracts within particular states or geographic regions. While coastal counties in South Carolina and southern California received especially large amounts of defense contracts, inland counties in Maine, the iron range of Minnesota, and northwest Nebraska also received substantial contracting dollars. A casual inspection of the data also provides little evidence that the WPB targeted contracts to states based on electoral concerns; for instance, Michigan was one of the Electoral College's largest prizes with 19 votes and the margin of victory in the 1940 presidential election was slimmer than in any other state (0.33 percentage points), yet it received a meager share of defense contracts from the WPB.

To test the degree to which political variables explain variation in war spending, we estimate a series of regression models that account for potential political and economic determinants of spending. Our main outcome of interest is the logged per-capita value of defense contracts allocated to counties during WWII. Essentially, we seek to understand (1) how well existing theories

Figure 1: Distribution of Federal Defense Contracts across U.S. Counties, 1941-1945



Darker colors indicate counties that received larger shares of defense contracts.

of presidential particularism account for observed patterns in the data and (2) whether these political variables out-perform economic variables.

Our chosen case would appear to provide an easy case for detecting evidence of presidential particularism. The WPB was insulated from congressional control and chosen directly by the president; moreover, presidents wield greater influence over government activity during war than during peace (Howell, Jackman and Rogowski 2013). To the extent the increased salience of national interests during war reduces the relevance of particularistic incentives, however, we expect to find little evidence of a relationship between our dependent variable and the president's partisan and electoral goals.

Our main explanatory variables are as follows:

Electoral Particularism. We characterize a president's electoral incentives based on whether "swing" states and "core" states receive more or less war spending on average relative to other states. Following Kriner and Reeves (2015), we operationalize "swing" states as those states where average margin of victory was within five percentage points over the 1932, 1936, and 1940 pres-

idential elections and define “core” states as those where President Roosevelt won by more than five percentage points in the 1932-1940 presidential elections. We create similar indicators at the county-level and interact them with “swing” and “core” state status to examine how presidential targeting varies within electorally-valuable states.

Partisan Particularism. We also investigate whether presidents may use war-related contracts to help boost his party’s congressional fortunes and include indicators for whether a county’s House member was a presidential copartisan, the closeness of the House election, and whether the representative was from a “swing” House district, all based on the 1940 election.

Infrastructure and suitability. Finally, we account for a variety of other characteristics from the 1940 Census that may explain variation in counties’ attractiveness for war-related expenditures, including their manufacturing capability (good for producing war supplies), measured by manufacturing output, and navigable water access (good for building and outfitting naval ships).

We estimate regression models of logged per-capita war spending in each county on the variables described above. Controls for 1940 county population and per capita income are included in all models. While we report heteroskedastic robust standard errors, we note that our coefficients are estimated with less precision when estimating more appropriate standard errors by, for instance, clustering on states or legislators. The models we present exclude state fixed effects yet our main conclusions are strengthened further when they are included. Our results are also robust to alternative characterizations of the dependent variable and when accounting for several other legislator characteristics. These results are available in the Online Appendix.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of our analyses. The first three columns presents results when investigating electoral particularism. Across all models, there is little evidence that war spending

followed an electoral logic. Overall, the results in column 1 show that counties with narrower presidential vote margins actually receive less – rather than more – war spending. Moreover, columns 2 and 3 provide no evidence that patterns of county-level spending are explained by a state’s value in the Electoral College. The coefficients for both core and swing states are negative (though not statistically significant) in both models, indicating that counties in these states received no greater share of federal contracts relative to counties in states who provided less electoral support for the president. Even when looking within states, we find inconsistent evidence of any electoral logic. Column 3 shows that core counties in core states received greater spending relative to other counties in core states, yet the overall estimated difference in defense contracts allocated to core counties in core states and counties in other states is small in magnitude (0.02) and indistinguishable from zero.

In columns 4 through 6 we evaluate the evidence that war spending was allocated in ways to benefit the president’s party or target copartisans in Congress. The presidents’ copartisans (Democrats) seem to enjoy approximately a three percentage point advantage in war spending, though the cross-sectional nature of our data cannot distinguish whether this is driven by Democrats on average or copartisanship with President Roosevelt. Contract spending was not targeted on the basis of districts with competitive elections in the U.S. House, however, as columns 5 and 6 demonstrate. In sum, we find some evidence that Roosevelt may have targeted congressional copartisans with greater war spending, yet the magnitude of the estimates is quite small.

In a final set of models, shown in columns 7 and 8, we explore whether patterns of war spending were correlated with economic and infrastructural conditions that served as indicators of a county’s suitability for defense contracts. As column 7 shows, we find strong evidence that counties with greater manufacturing capabilities and water access received significantly greater amounts of war spending. Column 8 reports results of a fully-specified model that includes the economic and infrastructural variables in addition to the indicators of particularism. This model provides further evidence that none of the political factors – including congressional coparti-

sanship – were significantly associated with the distribution of defense spending during World War II; instead, the presence of key infrastructural and economic conditions were the strongest predictor of the allocation of defense contracts.

Table 1: Presidential Particularism and the Distribution of World War II Spending

	Electoral particularism			Partisan particularism			Infrastructure	All Variables
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Presidential Closeness	-0.111 (0.059)							
Core State		0.013 (0.017)	-0.051* (0.026)					-0.051 (0.040)
Swing State		-0.002 (0.026)	-0.010 (0.026)					-0.018 (0.032)
Core County			-0.037 (0.033)					-0.094* (0.039)
Core County \times Core State			0.109** (0.042)					0.127* (0.053)
Core County \times Swing State			0.081 (0.145)					0.010 (0.173)
Democrat				0.034* (0.017)	0.029* (0.018)	0.035* (0.016)		0.032 (0.030)
House Closeness, 1940					-0.043 (0.051)			
Swing House						0.012 (0.022)		-0.005 (0.026)
Log(Population), 1940	0.149** (0.009)	0.150** (0.009)	0.148** (0.009)	0.146** (0.010)	0.145** (0.010)	0.145** (0.010)	0.063** (0.020)	0.057* (0.023)
Log(Per Capita Income), 1940	0.305** (0.017)	0.299** (0.017)	0.301** (0.017)	0.294** (0.017)	0.297** (0.018)	0.293** (0.017)	0.165** (0.028)	0.151** (0.028)
Log(Mfg. Output), 1940							0.051** (0.011)	0.056** (0.011)
Water Access							0.082** (0.020)	0.080** (0.020)
Constant	-2.887** (0.101)	-2.854** (0.099)	-2.846** (0.100)	-2.800** (0.109)	-2.818** (0.111)	-2.797** (0.109)	-1.342** (0.245)	-1.385** (0.271)
N	2,665	2,665	2,665	2,439	2,439	2,439	2,044	1,873
Adjusted R ²	0.314	0.313	0.315	0.294	0.294	0.294	0.358	0.333

The dependent variable is the logged per-capita value of federal defense contracts. Entries are linear regression coefficients with heteroskedastic robust standard errors in parentheses. * indicates $p < .05$ and ** indicates $p < .01$, two-tailed tests.

The supplementary materials show that our core conclusions are robust across a wide range of additional analyses, including models with additional control variables, alternative characterizations of the dependent variable, and with the inclusion of state fixed effects. Finally, we show using Ratkovic and Tingley (2017)’s Bayesian LASSO procedure – a machine learning method designed to select variables strongly related to the outcome – that only the economic variables remain predictive of war spending. In short, the amalgam of evidence from these statistical analyses indicate that presidents do not seem to target spending to politically relevant constituencies

even when they have near unilateral influence over spending; rather in times of war, presidents seem to target spending in a manner consistent with the national interest.

Conclusion

Presidents confront a variety of incentives: they simultaneously seek to retain the White House for themselves and their party; to advance their key policy objectives; to improve the nation's standing; and to secure their place in history. Sometimes, these goals align; at other times, they conflict. Understanding how presidents govern while balancing these varied objectives is critically important for characterizing the president's impact on the American polity.

Our results suggest that while presidents may sometimes prioritize electoral and partisan goals when distributing federal resources, particularism describes only one set of incentives that structure presidential behavior. Particularistic incentives may always lurk but presidents may not always act upon them. When the national interest is especially salient, as it is during major wars, presidents may eschew particularism and instead act as stewards of the entire nation. Developing more systematic theory to account for the conditions under which presidents upon particularistic incentives despite potential costs to national outcomes would be a productive enterprise.

We close by noting some limitations of our research and opportunities for further investigation. First, our cross-sectional research design limits the strength of our causal inferences. Second, while our data represent what are (to our knowledge) the best available measures of the distribution of federal resources during World War II, there likely were other federal resources directed to non-defense purposes during this same time period. Whether particularism varies across policy domains in addition to political context remains an important question for additional study. Finally, World War II was an exceptional war and — for many reasons — Franklin Roosevelt was an exceptional president. Further research is necessary to understand how incentives for presidential particularism vary across history and presidents.

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