

Particularism or Policy?

When Distributive Outlays Flow to the President's Core Supporters

Shu Fu*

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Abstract

The literature on distributive politics reveals that presidents regularly influence federal spending and disproportionately direct federal grants toward their core supporters. This paper offers a comprehensive assessment of the interpretation of core-supporter targeting. Empirical evidence shows that the underlying patterns of partisan targeting do not accord with standard accounts of party building activities nor electoral considerations that are evidence of presidential particularism. Instead, this paper argues that presidential policy priority better explains core-state targeting. Presidents use agencies that are ideologically aligned with them or associated with their policy priorities to enhance the largesse they bestow on core constituencies, and this is the consequence of presidents pursuing ideological and policy goals. Collectively, it indicates a less cynical point of view on the orientation of the American presidency.

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*Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the Department of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago; fushu@uchicago.edu. I thank Douglas Kriner and Andrew Reeves for their clarification and generous feedback while engaging with their work. I thank Chris Berry, Anthony Fowler, Will Howell, Justin Grimmer, Jon Rogowski, Bobby Gulotty, Eric Oliver, Maggie Penn, and Luwei Ying for helpful suggestions.

Scholarship on distributive politics focuses on presidential influence on the distribution of federal funds (Berry, Burden and Howell, 2010) and further reveals that this federal largesse is disproportionately targeted toward the core states that solidly backed the president’s party in recent elections (Dynes and Huber, 2015; Kriner and Reeves, 2015). Even though scholars consistently find empirical evidence that the president’s core constituencies reap more federal outlays (Bertelli and Grose, 2009; Gimpel, Lee and Thorpe, 2012; Larcinese, Rizzo and Testa, 2006; Levitt and Snyder, 1995), interpretation about core-supporter targeting is less clear. Is it because of presidential particularism (Kriner and Reeves, 2015), or is it because of presidential policy priorities?

Core-voter targeting can be interpreted as evidence of presidential particularism—presidents prioritize the needs and wants of some citizens over others by deliberately targeting federal grants toward their core constituencies to improve their party’s performance in upcoming elections (Kriner and Reeves, 2015). The previous literature largely overlooked a policy-based interpretation. The disparity may arise because Democratic and Republican presidents have different policy agendas and distinct ideological visions of what best serves the national interest. While holding their prioritized policies in mind, the chief executive may, coincidentally, target federal funds to locales where their co-partisan voters are concentrated. Accordingly, granting more funds to core states may not indicate a partisan bias in presidential orientation but simply that presidents from the two major parties pursue different ideological goals.

The interpretation of core-state targeting matters because it is related to how we think about presidential leadership. A conventional view of the presidency argues that presidents are the true stewards of national welfare and represent the needs and interests of the nation as a whole (Fitzpatrick, 1931; Howell and Moe, 2016; Kagan, 2001; Wilson, 1908).¹ Recently, however, scholars have questioned this view. A body of literature alleges that chief executives

¹For example, Fitzpatrick (1931) mentioned that the founding fathers explicitly expressed whose interests the American presidents ought to serve and represent. This was echoed by President Woodrow Wilson (1908) when he said, “the president is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people.” Legal scholars also routinely advocate this perspective of the universalistic presidency. Kagan (2001) articulated the same view before being appointed as a Supreme Court Justice.

are decidedly “particularistic” in orientation, pursuing policies that channel public benefits disproportionately toward some specific and valuable political constituencies (Kriner and Reeves, 2015; Lowande, Jenkins and Clarke, 2018; Stratmann and Wojnilower, 2015). A debate on the orientation of the presidents—whether they are national leaders or particularistic statesmen—has begun in the study of the American presidency.

This paper contributes to this debate on presidential orientation by comprehensively assessing why federal outlays disproportionately flow to the president’s core supporters. In specific, using county-level data of federal grants distribution from 1984 to 2008, I replicate and extend Kriner and Reeves’ finding of core-state targeting and further probe the meaning of it. If core-state targeting was interpreted as evidence of presidential particularism, it would reflect efforts by presidents to boost their electoral fortunes and build their parties. Hence, presidents “are not national leaders, but rather predominantly leaders of the partisan coalitions that elected them to office” (Kriner and Reeves, 2015, 186). If this documented effect reflects party-building activities, as other scholars have shown (Galvin, 2010), it should be particularly large when the presidential party’s standing is weak. Using a variety of measures of party strength, however, I find the opposite to be true. The president’s core constituents receive more federal outlays when their party is strong, particularly when party-building efforts are expected to wane. Therefore, core-state targeting is not a function of party building. I then present evidence that the documented effect does not vary with the electoral cycle, which indicates that core-state targeting is also not a function of electoral considerations.

Alternatively, I present evidence that the documented effect may reflect the president’s policy priorities and ideological orientation. I disaggregate the federal grants data by federal agencies, so the revised dataset tracks the annual receipts to each county from each originating agency. I find, when conditioning the agencies charged with actually disbursing these federal outlays (Berry and Gersen, 2017; Krause and Meier, 2003; Krause and O’Connell, 2016; Napolio, 2021), that the core-state effect entirely disappears, which indicates the distributive

imbalance happens across agencies instead of within agencies. Further evidence shows that federal spending is allocated disproportionately through the agencies that are aligned with the president’s ideology and through the agencies that are associated with the policy issues prioritized in the president’s State of the Union addresses. In sum, core-supporter targeting appears to be an artifact of presidents’ efforts to direct federal outlays to reflect their larger policy agendas, rather than evidence of party building or electoral purposes.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the evidence of core-supporter targeting, the literature on presidential particularism, and the formal theories of vote-buying. Second, I theorize different interpretations of core-state targeting and formulate empirically testable hypotheses for each. The empirical sections start by revisiting evidence of core-state targeting. Then, the remainder of the paper empirically tests potential interpretations of why core constituencies receive disproportionately more federal outlays—party building, electoral purposes, and the president’s policy priority. Finally, it concludes with a discussion on how this empirical exercise impacts our understanding of presidential leadership.

1 Presidential Particularism and Core-State Targeting

The notion that American presidents have a national outlook and represent the whole nation’s interests at large is not only deeply rooted in the American political culture, many political scientists and presidential scholars also treat it as an integral and essential part of the American institutional arrangement. Contrary to members of Congress who have parochial interests in their own districts (Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974), presidents are uniquely held accountable by the public for the performance of the whole government, and their leadership and legacies depend upon effective national governance (Moe and Wilson, 1994). In their efforts to meet the onslaught of national expectations and leave behind a legacy, presidents focus on the well-being of the national community instead of pursuing parochial interests. As Howell and Moe (2016, 96) put it, “presidents use the authority, leverage, and resources at

their disposal to elevate the national interest, to pursue long-term solutions to the nations' pressing problems, and to bring rationality and coherence to government as a whole.”

In contrast to these traditional national orientations, however, a body of new research claims that presidents are particularistic; they pursue policies that direct public benefits disproportionately toward some specific and valuable political constituencies. Empirical evidence of presidential particularism is provided from multiple perspectives, including the distribution of federal grants (Kriner and Reeves, 2015; Stratmann and Wojnilower, 2015), disaster declarations, and transportation grants (Reeves, 2011). Although the traditional literature on the American presidency incisively assumes that—on behalf of the United States on a volatile and complex world stage—the commander-in-chief is supposed to be more national in orientation (Canes-Wrone, Howell and Lewis, 2008; Wildavsky, 1996). Lowande, Jenkins and Clarke (2018) extend the particularistic claim into the realm of foreign affairs. They provide evidence from US trade policies between 1986 and 2006 and find that presidents strategically target trade protections to industries in politically valuable states.

To understand the orientation of the particularistic president, scholars have discussed several origins that may shift presidents' outlooks toward some politically valuable constituencies instead of the nation at large. The interest of presidents' co-partisan constituencies, the “core,” stands out as one major factor (Dynes and Huber, 2015; Kriner and Reeves, 2015; McCarty, 2000). The president, as the party leader, is more inclined to be responsive to the needs and wants of their core partisan base.

Along this line of thought, a bulk of empirical evidence shows that disproportionate federal outlays are distributed to presidents' core supporters. Kriner and Reeves (2015) find evidence that presidents systematically direct a disproportionate share of federal funds to their core partisan base. Specifically, they show that a county in a core state received on average \$28.3 million more in federal grant funding than a county in a non-core state. Moreover, Chen (2013); Larcinese, Rizzo and Testa (2006); Levitt and Snyder (1995) find consistent empirical results that federal benefits are disproportionately targeted toward core voters.

Scholars find consistent evidence for core-state targeting; however, the literature lacks a deeper understanding of the interpretation and mechanism underlying the executive’s favor of core states. What strategies and mechanisms do presidents employ to make federal spending responsive to their core? This is an important inquiry for several reasons. First, the literature lacks a solid theoretical reason for core-state targeting. In the formal theory literature, there is an old and rich discussion on vote-buying. Vote-buying models explain how and why lobbyists (such as traditional interest groups or elected officials, like the president, who have the power to allocate public goods) offer side payments to voters (or legislators) in exchange for their support in elections (or floor votes). The essence of the vote-buying literature is whether allocating targetable benefits to swing voters or core voters maximizes electoral prospects. However, most vote-buying models subscribe to “swing voter logic,” which predicts that presidents have no reason to target core voters. The pure Downsian model predicts that presidents will adopt a budgetary platform that targets the ideological position of the median voter (Downs, 1957). Building on this logic, Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1984) argue that it is optimal for incumbent politicians to channel income transfers toward the most ideological moderates. Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) examine the validity of Hotelling’s “principle of minimum differentiation” to project that federal resources should be distributed toward swing voters who are the most easily swayed by monetary transfers. Dixit and Longregan (1996) offers a general model of how federal benefits are targeted and also shows that the density of swing voters drives the parties’ apportionment.

On the other side of the debate, Cox and McCubbins (1986) set the cornerstone for the core-voter model. They argue that for risk-averse presidents, targeting distributive benefits toward core ideological constituents maximizes electoral returns. Because a party’s core constituents are more reliably responsive to federal grant transfers, targeting loyal voters can be seen as a safer investment than aiming at swing voters. Hence, core targeting is a rational strategy for risk-averse players (Cox and McCubbins, 1986, 181). However, Cox (2006) himself conceded that, compared with the mainstream swing-voter models that are good

explanations for persuading voters, core-voter logic only holds if we consider coordination (an attempt to affect the number and character of alternative parties in a multi-party political system) and mobilization (an attempt to buy turnout). Core-voter logic has a conditional explanatory power, and one of the conditions (coordination) does not apply to the US two-party political system. On net, core-supporter targeting does not accord with the formal theory literature of vote-buying. Therefore, we require further explanation about why the president's core voters benefit more than others from federal spending.

Second, the literature lacks a comprehensive investigation of exactly how the president can influence the distribution of federal funds, especially through different federal agencies. Core-state targeting is merely a distributive outcome; more research is needed on the role of federal agencies in the president's ability to engage in pork-barrel politics. Hudak (2014) focuses on how agency structure and characteristics aid (or abet) presidential influence over executive particularism toward swing states, and Napolio (2021) assesses how federal agencies facilitate (or frustrate) federal grant distribution toward congressional districts represented by the president's co-partisan legislators. As far as I know, no one has investigated how federal agencies motivate (or moderate) core-state targeting.

Lastly, a detailed interpretation of core-supporter targeting delineates the limits of the particularism explanation. It matters significantly about how we think of presidential leadership (Howell and Moe, 2016). If presidents deliberately target federal grants toward their cores to improve the party's performance in upcoming elections, it further confirms the peculiar nature of the presidential outlook that prioritizes the needs and wants of some citizens over others. Alternatively, this disparity may arise because presidents from the two parties hold dissimilar policy priorities and distinct ideological visions of what best serves the national interest. This less cynical explanation may push back the particularistic claim on the American presidency. Therefore, a comprehensive empirical assessment of these interpretations is urgently needed.

2 Hypotheses of Core Targeting Interpretations

A key theoretical question is how to interpret presidents' pursuit of budgetary policies that disproportionately reward core states. This paper aims to further interpret core constituency benefits and rethink presidential particularism. There is no reason to suppose that only one of these mechanisms operates. Interpretations that drive the distribution of federal grants are often seen as competing. One interpretation need not, and should not, exclude all others. But it is worthwhile to delineate all possible interpretations, and create empirically testable hypotheses associated with them. These hypotheses derive from a logic that is if a specific interpretation is true, we should find further evidence for it.

The first mechanism of core-supporter targeting can be interpreted as a co-partisan bias. Presidents, as partisans-in-chief, possess potent resources and unique authorities to affect party building. Party-building is defined inconsistently, but one important feature of it is coalition-building in the electorate (Frymer and Skrentny, 1998; James, 2000; Seligman and Covington, 1989). A president pursues not only his own success in presidential elections but also his fellow co-partisan officials' victories in congressional and local elections.² Furthermore, presidents have ample means and strong capabilities to shape federal budgets at both the proposal and implementation stages (Berry, Burden and Howell, 2010). With the goal of strengthening the coalition in mind, presidents can utilize this capacity to invest in their party's electoral competitiveness by promoting a partisan-driven federal outlay distribution that favors their co-partisans. In return, the partisan base would be solidified and electoral fortunes further consolidated. Although there is arguably little variation in party competition in the modern era of increasing partisan polarization (Lee, 2016), the polarized president may achieve a more partisan budget and appropriations (Cameron, 2002). As a vivid example, Obama's embrace of a partisan leadership was illustrated by his efforts to consolidate grassroots support by implementing liberal Democratic budget plans (Milkis, Rhodes and

²An example of coalition-building is the existence of presidential "coattails"; a popular presidential candidate can increase the probability of his co-partisan officials winning congressional elections.

Charnock, 2012).

If the president channels federal grants toward his core supporters to build his party, we would expect this to be a function of the presidential party's strength. Presidency scholars have shown that the propensity of presidents to engage in party-building activities should depend on the competitive standing of their party. According to Daniel Galvin (2010), modern presidents play the role of partisan-in-chief by increasing their party's resources and enhancing their party's electoral competitiveness when their party holds a weak position of power. Therefore, the competitive imbalance between the parties creates different incentives for majority-party presidents and minority-party presidents; and such differences correspondingly produce distinct types of president-party interactions. As Galvin argues, "with their party in the ostensible minority, Republican presidents were driven to act in an innovative, constructive, and forward-looking fashion concerning their party organization; with their party in the ostensible majority, Democratic presidents perceived no need for such an approach" (2010, 23).

Galvin's party-building theory reveals a fundamental trade-off between solidifying the partisan core and achieving long-term and grand political objectives. The presidential party's standing plays an imperative role in how the president balances this compromise. On the one hand, minority-party presidents would have strong incentives to change their political environment and engage in political strategies that would solidify their partisan bases. On the other hand, when the president's party holds a deep and durable competitive advantage, the chief executive sees no urgent need to invest more in their party.

Hence, according to the party-building logic, an empirically testable hypothesis is that a strong party standing generates fewer party-building activities from the president. It follows that if core-state targeting is indicative of partisan particularism, core states should, comparatively speaking, receive a smaller share of federal benefits when the president is faced with a stronger party competitive environment than with a weak party standing.

Hypothesis 1 (party building): If supporting core voters is the reason for party

building, the president should employ core-voter targeting LESS when his party is in a strong competitive standing than in a weak competitive standing.

Closely linked with the co-partisan bias interpretation, presidents may target core voters for electoral purposes. That being said, a risk-averse president may target his co-partisans to solidify their voting proclivity in elections. Empirical evidence that voters reward incumbent presidents (or their party's nominee) for increased federal spending in their communities supports this reason (Kriner and Reeves, 2012). Hence, it follows that if core-state targeting is indicative of electoral concerns, we would expect to see core states reap more benefits during election years.³

Hypothesis 2 (electoral purposes): If supporting core voters is for electoral purposes, the president should employ core-voter targeting more in election years than in off years.

The second mechanism of core-state targeting can be interpreted as a president's policy priorities and federal agency ideology. Since agencies implement the allocation of federal grants, federal spending is actually driven by the president's ideological and policy priorities. Presidents from different parties have distinct ideologies and policy priorities that they believe best serve the national interest. For example, Democratic presidents advocate increasing tax rates and allocating more federal grants to bridge the educational gap between rich and poor communities. Coincidentally, many poor people who reside in socio-economically disadvantaged districts exhibit the most need for federal funds and already support the Democratic party. On the other side of the aisle, Republican presidents believe that it is essential to preserve natural lands, so allocating funds through the US Department of the Interior is aligned with their priorities. The recipients of federal funds from the Department of the Interior

³Admittedly, electoral consideration is an umbrella concept, which may include party-building efforts and policy priorities. Presidents might prioritize specific policy issues with an electoral calculation (Bawn et al., 2012). Policy-based interpretation of core-supporter targeting is not exclusive to any electoral calculations. But if the presidents target the core with more federal largess purely for electoral purposes, then we should expect it happens more in election years.

primarily live in rural areas and they are more likely to be Republican. Accordingly, it can be a coincidence that federal funding is allocated to the places where the residents happen to be the presidents' co-partisans. This less cynical interpretation may not indicate a bias in the president's outlook; a budgetary tilting toward the core does not mean a particularistic aim but the meaningful results of the president's ideology-driven policy priorities. All in all, presidents may achieve universalistic ends by particularistic means.

Federal grant distribution occurs within federal agencies, so the mechanism of core-state targeting must include both presidential preferences and the structural characteristics of agencies (Berry and Gersen, 2017; Hudak, 2014; Krause and Meier, 2003; Krause and O'Connell, 2016; Napolio, 2021). Presidential scholars have acknowledged that presidents can effectively exercise control over agency behaviors through *politicization* and *centralization* (Lewis, 2008; Lewis and Moe, 2009). Accordingly, I attend to two agency features that facilitate core-state targeting: ideology alignment with the president and policy priority level associated with the agency.

Agencies that are ideologically aligned with the president would have more leverage in federal funding appropriations. Presidents fill the upper echelons of federal agencies with staff who are proximate to their ideology (politicization) (Hudak, 2014, 74). Hence, it can be easier to propose federal grant budgets to ideologically aligned agencies, and these agencies are more likely to administer the spending programs as the president wishes. Similarly, presidents from different parties have distinct policy priorities; so when they allocate federal spending, it is easier for presidents to funnel funds through agencies associated with their most prioritized issues. Because the president can increase issue salience and set his preferred policy agenda, the importance and influence of federal agencies associated with the president's policy priority is always higher than other agencies (centralization). For example, empirical evidence shows that in 2009, President Obama worked closely with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to allocate a substantial proportion of federal money to create and advance the Race to the Top Initiative (Howell and Magazinnik, 2017).

If core-state targeting is indicative of the president’s ideology and policy priorities, we would observe disproportionately more federal grants channeled through agencies that are ideologically aligned with the president or associated with the policy priority set by the president in the president’s core states.

Hypothesis 3 (ideology and policy): If supporting core voters is driven by the president’s policy priorities and agency ideology, the president should employ core-voter targeting more through ideologically aligned agencies and policy-prioritized agencies.

3 Evidence of Core-State Targeting

This section revisits the main empirical findings that support contentions about partisan bias in distributive outlays. I replicate the main results of Kriner and Reeves (2015) on federal grants distribution at the county level for the fiscal years 1984-2008, using data from the Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR). The compiled dataset reports the number of federal grants spent at the county level in a given year. With 25 years of data for 3,082 counties, the dataset includes 76,937 valid observations.

In estimating core-state targeting in federal benefits distribution, I follow Kriner and Reeves’s identification strategy and construct the dependent variable as the natural log of the amount of federal grants received by counties in a given year. I treat federal grants distribution as a direct and proper measurement because it is part of the federal discretionary funds that can effectively reveal the president’s will and priority. Each year, the federal government allocates hundreds of billions of dollars in grants to fund numerous projects across the country. According to the latest available CFFR in 2010⁴, the federal government awarded around \$683 billion in grants, accounting for 13.4% of all federal expenditures.

⁴Please see, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2011/governments/cffr-10.pdf>, accessed June 2020.

I first replicate and extend Kriner and Reeves’s generalized difference-in-differences design with county and year fixed effects to investigate core-state targeting and swing-state targeting on federal grants allocation. In the formal specification,

$$\log(\text{outlays}_{it}) = \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Swing State}_{i,t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}. \quad (1)$$

where i refers to county and t represents year. *Core State* is coded “1” if the president’s party achieved an average of 55% or more of the two-party vote in the previous three presidential election cycles in the state where the county i is situated, and “0” otherwise, and *Swing State* is coded “1” where the losing candidate won an average of 45% or more of the two-party vote over the past three election years. Hence, the baseline of comparison is hostile states. The control variables, \mathbb{X} , include politician specific controls (whether it’s member of Congress is from the president’s party, from the majority party, or is committee chair of the Appropriations or Ways and Means Committees)⁵ and geographic-specific controls (population, poverty, and income per capita). The inclusion of county fixed effects, α_i , controls all time-invariant county characteristics—both observed and unobserved; and the inclusion of year, δ_{t-1} , controls for time trend. In this context, the necessary parallel assumption is that federal grants should be allocated in the same trend and pattern across the nation.

Improving upon Kriner and Reeves’ already solid research design, I make several adjustments. First, following others (Alexander, Berry and Howell, 2016; Anderson and Woon, 2014; Fourinaies and Mutlu-Eren, 2015), I account for the delay between the appropriation and allocation of federal outlays. Because federal expenditures in a given year are based upon the appropriations budget passed one year earlier, I match federal grants spent in year t to the political and demographic characteristics of year $t - 1$. For example, in 2001, when George W. Bush was president, federal outlays were decided by the 2000 appropriations budget pro-

⁵A matching strategy requires mention regarding district-level controls in county-level data. More than 80% of counties match uniquely to a single congressional district. For population-dense counties that are subdivided into multiple congressional districts, I adopt Kriner and Reeves’s strategy and assign to that county the member of Congress who represents the greatest share of the county’s population.

posed by Democratic President Bill Clinton and passed in a Republican Congress. To be clear, Kriner and Reeves (2015) did follow the same approach for the congressional variables in their analysis (e.g., whether the county is represented by a member of the majority party, a member of the president’s party, etc.). However, regarding the measure of a core state or a swing state, Kriner and Reeves essentially coded the variables to privilege *ex-post* influence, matching federal grants in year t with the political characteristics in the same year t (they measure whether a state was a core state based on the president in power during the bulk of the fiscal year itself); although they rightly note that the results are similar when an alternate coding scheme for core states uses the 1-year lag. Given arguments in the literature about *ex ante* and *ex post* means of presidential influence over budgetary allocations (Berry, Burden and Howell, 2010), either seems reasonable. However, since we have little knowledge, as far as I know, about whether the *ex-ante* presidential influence on the federal outlay is greater than the *ex-post*, or vice versa, I follow the majority of scholars in the field of distributive politics and use the 1-year lag adjustment on the measure of a core state and a swing state.

Furthermore, although the observations in the dataset are counties in years since the treatments (i.e., core states and swing states) are measured at the state level, I cluster the standard errors at the state level. Kriner and Reeves’s analysis also examined whether counties represented by presidential co-partisans or members of the majority party received more money, so they reasonably clustered the standard errors at the county level. In my reassessment, however, a core state is the main variable of interest; therefore, I cluster by state to get the most accurate variance. It is worth noting, the covariates in the analyses are at the county level, thus yielding more accurate estimates. Beyond that, in the following empirical investigations, I also test whether the core counties within core states and within swing states reap more federal grants in different conditions, and these analyses yield similar results.

Table 1 presents the effects of core states on federal grants distribution at the county level estimated by both Kriner and Reeves’s model and my adjusted model. The evidence clearly

Table 1: Extension of Kriner and Reeves’s Estimate of Core-State Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants	
	<i>K&R</i> Replication	<i>K&R</i> Adjustment
	(1)	(2)
Core State	0.064*** (0.006)	0.042** (0.018)
Swing State	0.039*** (0.005)	0.046** (0.019)
MC from president’s party	0.020*** (0.004)	0.012 (0.009)
MC from majority party	0.025*** (0.004)	0.021* (0.011)
Committee chair	-0.021** (0.010)	-0.037 (0.029)
Appropriations / Ways and Means	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.024* (0.013)
County population (logged)	0.234*** (0.031)	0.233** (0.099)
Poverty rate	0.005*** (0.001)	0.004 (0.002)
Income per capita	0.004** (0.002)	-0.0004 (0.002)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Observations	76,937	76,916
R ²	0.953	0.894

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Models (2) uses the year $t - 1$ adjustment, Model (1) does not.
3. Kriner and Reeves’s Model (1) uses robust standard error clustered by county. Since Core State is state-variant, I report robust standard errors clustered by state for Model (2).

indicates that the president’s core states received disproportionately more federal grants, so core-state targeting is a robust empirical observation. Column (1) in Table 1 exactly replicates Kriner and Reeves’ finding (2015). A county in a core state would receive, on average, 6.4% more federal grants than a county in a hostile state. Column (2) presents the adjusted model with a year $t - 1$ adjustment and standard errors clustered by states. I find that the effect of core-state targeting slightly shrinks in magnitude but is still statistically significant: the coefficient of *Core State* is 0.042 with a 95% confidence level. Substantively,

all else being equal, counties in states that strongly voted for the president’s party in the most recent three elections are allocated 4.2% more federal grants than counties in hostile states. Comparing the two models, I find that the year $t - 1$ adjustment shrinks the size of the core-state effect by one-third but increases swing-state targeting slightly. Moreover, Online Table A.2 demonstrates that core counties in core states or swing states still enjoy a disproportionate federal grants benefit; however, the magnitude of the core-county effect becomes smaller but the estimates are still statistically significant. It suffices to say that core supporters reap disproportionately more federal grants is a robust and interesting finding in distributive politics.

4 Interpretations of Core-State Targeting

Evidence shows that presidents influence budgetary distribution to channel federal grants disproportionately to politically valuable constituencies, especially swing states and core states. This is less interesting or surprising when it concerns swing-state targeting because it is consistent with the median voter theorem and the vote-buying theory. However, core-state targeting really catches our attention. While core-state targeting is intriguing, its interpretation is less clear. In the following subsections, I evidence for each mechanism that explains why federal outlays disproportionately flow to the president’s core supporters.

4.1 Party Building?

How should we interpret core-state targeting from the perspective of presidential party-building? If more federal outlays flowing to the core is due to a president’s party-building efforts, we would expect to see it happen less when the president’s party is strongly competitive. Empirically, the goal here is to test the effect of core states on federal spending distribution conditional on the party’s competitive environment.

I deploy multiple measures to quantify the presidential party’s strength. The first measure

is direct and straightforward, that is, divided *vs.* unified government. This measure reflects the party’s standing at the federal level. A unified government indicates a strong party or a majority party owned by the president. Congress is the central venue where presidents try to advance policy at the national level. When the president’s party controls both chambers of Congress, the president focuses on pushing forward his preferred policies. But if the other party possesses Congress, presidents cannot quickly get their agenda through (Cameron, 2000; Howell, 2003). If directing more federal benefits toward core states improves partisan strength within Congress in later years, we should expect presidents to perform that costly activity when their party is weak in Congress. For example, from Eisenhower to Clinton’s first term, the Democratic Party was considered the majority since the Democrats dominated Congress. When the president faces a unified government, which indicates a strong party standing, the chief executive is predicted to use fewer unilateral directives through discretionary budgets to exert his priorities (Howell, 2003). In other words, the president who faces a unified government is less likely to allocate more funds toward his co-partisans to solidify his core base.

With this simple measure of the party’s competitive standing in mind, I created a dummy moderator, “Unified,” as “1” when the president faces a unified government and “0” otherwise. I then extend the adjusted model by interacting the moderator “Unified” with the variable of interest, “Core State,” to assess the effect of core-state targeting conditional on the party strength. Building upon the adjusted model specification, this multiplicative interaction model is formally specified as:

$$\log(\text{outlays}_{it}) = \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Unified}_{t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \tag{2}$$

where $\text{Core State}_{i,t-1}$ is the base level term that indicates divided government, and $\text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Unified}_{t-1}$ is the interaction term that should reveal the effect of core states on spending allocation conditional on greater party strength. The constitutive term of Unified_{t-1} is omitted

from the equation as it is subsumed in the year fixed effects. The party-building hypothesis predicts β_2 being significantly less than 0.

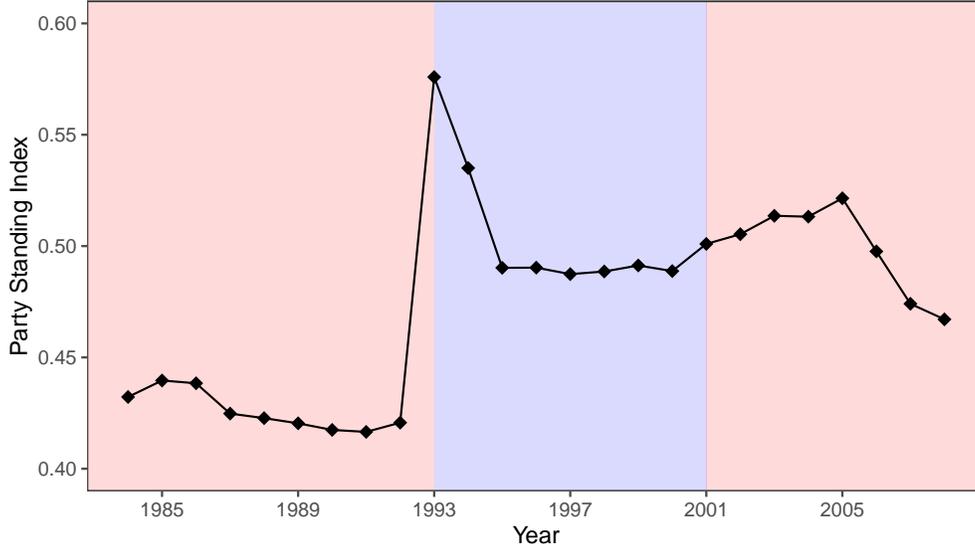
I also create a more comprehensive and continuous measure of parties’ competitive standing. It originates from the qualitative assessments by Galvin (2010), which drew upon a wealth of primary source materials, including internal White House memos, letters, strategy papers, personal notes, and White House tape recordings. Galvin assessed each party’s standing based on the composition of both chambers of Congress, state legislative seats held by the party, and partisan share of governorship. Fortunately, all these components to measure partisan competitive imbalance are quantifiable; therefore, I construct a Party Standing Index (PSI) for the years 1984-2008 (see, Figure 1). As shown in Table 2, PSI is comprised of five components calculated each year, weighted by factor analysis. The PSI is comprehensive because it indicates the party’s standing at both the federal and state levels. The index is based on a two-party evaluation; third-party candidates are omitted. Roughly speaking, a PSI larger than 0.5 indicates a strong party standing.

Table 2: Components of the Party Standing Index (PSI)

Components	Weights from Factor Analysis
Senate	0.7105
House	0.9583
State Upper Chamber	0.9526
State Lower Chamber	0.9561
Governor	0.8863

Next, I discretize the continuous moderator PSI into three bins (corresponding to each of the three terciles), generate a dummy variable for each bin, and denote them “Weak,” “Median,” and “Strong” party standing. The weak party standing category includes four years of Reagan’s second term and George H. W. Bush’s four-year term. The strong party standing category includes the first two years of the Clinton administration and the first six years of George W. Bush administration, which are the years of unified government years. The remaining eight years comprise the middle party standing category. I further test the party standing hypothesis with this three-dummy multiplicative interaction model. The

Figure 1: Party Standing Index, 1984-2008



model specification is:

$$\log(\text{outlays}_{it}) = \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Median}_{t-1} + \beta_3 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Strong}_{t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \quad (3)$$

where $\text{Core State}_{i,t-1}$ is the base level term that indicates the effect of core-state targeting conditional on a weak party competitive environment. The two constitutive terms of Median_{t-1} and Strong_{t-1} are included in the year dummies, δ_{t-1} . The party building hypothesis predicts that β_2 and β_3 will be significantly less than 0 and $|\beta_2| < |\beta_3|$.

Measuring party standing can be arbitrary; therefore, I also incorporate an existing and widely used measure of a state’s competitiveness between the two major parties—the Ranney Index. Austin Ranney created a Ranney score that reflects a party’s standing in the state legislature. I use Carl Klarner’s dataset of “Other Scholars’ Competitiveness Measures,” which includes the Ranney Index.⁶ A Ranney Score ranges from 0 to 1, with “0” signifying complete Republican control of both chambers, “1” signifying complete Democratic control

⁶Please see <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/22519>. The database can be found in the Harvard Dataverse, accessed in June 2022.

of both chambers, and “0.5” signifying neither. When both chambers of a state’s legislature are controlled by the president’s party, the probability for a competitive party standing at the state level is good. Therefore, I code “strong party standing in state” when the president’s party completely controls the state legislature, “weak party standing in state” when the president’s opposing party completely controls the state legislature, and “median party standing in state” otherwise. The strong, median, and weak party standings in state is similar to the three-bin estimators of the PSI; hence I use a similar model specification as before. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{it}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Median in State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 \text{Strong in State}_{i,t-1} + \\ & \beta_4 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Median in State}_{i,t-1} + \\ & \beta_5 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Strong in State}_{i,t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

In this specification, the interaction between the core state and the party standing in the state will provide some evidence for the state-variant party-building explanation. It is worth noting that the measures of party standing in the state legislature, with subscripts of $i, t - 1$, are both time-variant and state-variant, so the model includes the constitutive terms (i.e., party standing indicators at the state level, being noted as *Median in State* and *Strong in State*). Taking advantage of the time-and-state-variant moderators, this model will provide a more accurate and detailed estimate of the heterogeneity of core-state targeting regarding party strength.

If core-state targeting is interpreted by the party-building logic, we should observe that presidents target their core constituencies less disproportionately (or more evenly across all constituencies) when their party is in a stronger competitive standing. After all, during such conditions, presidents have less of an urgent need to solidify or reward their cores by channeling more federal benefits to them. Strikingly, however, the results of multiplicative interaction models, as shown in Table 3, suggest just the opposite. No matter how we measure party strength, the evidence suggests that core constituents benefit most when their party is

Table 3: Party-Building Approach in Explaining Core-State Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants		
	<i>Federal</i>	<i>Federal & State</i>	<i>State</i>
	<i>Level</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Level</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Core state	0.009 (0.025)	0.00005 (0.042)	-0.014 (0.039)
Core state × unified government	0.126** (0.053)		
Core state × median party standing		0.030 (0.070)	
Core state × strong party standing		0.133* (0.067)	
Core state × median party standing in state			0.050 (0.033)
Core state × strong party standing in state			0.096 (0.094)
Swing state	0.049** (0.019)	0.049** (0.020)	0.043** (0.019)
Median party standing in state			-0.008 (0.017)
Strong party standing in state			0.020 (0.027)
Controls	✓	✓	✓
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	76,916	76,916	74,591
R ²	0.894	0.894	0.892

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.
3. In the online appendix, Table A.2 displays the full results with control variables.

strong.

Column (1) in Table 3 shows that counties in core states reap significantly more federal grants conditional on a unified government situation. And the distinction between unified government and divided government periods is sharp: the coefficient of $\beta_2 = 0.126$, with a 95% confidence interval, indicates a strong party competitive environment and yields around 12.6% more grants allocated toward core states than non-core states than in a divided government scenario. Therefore, the simple test of core-state targeting conditional on divided or unified

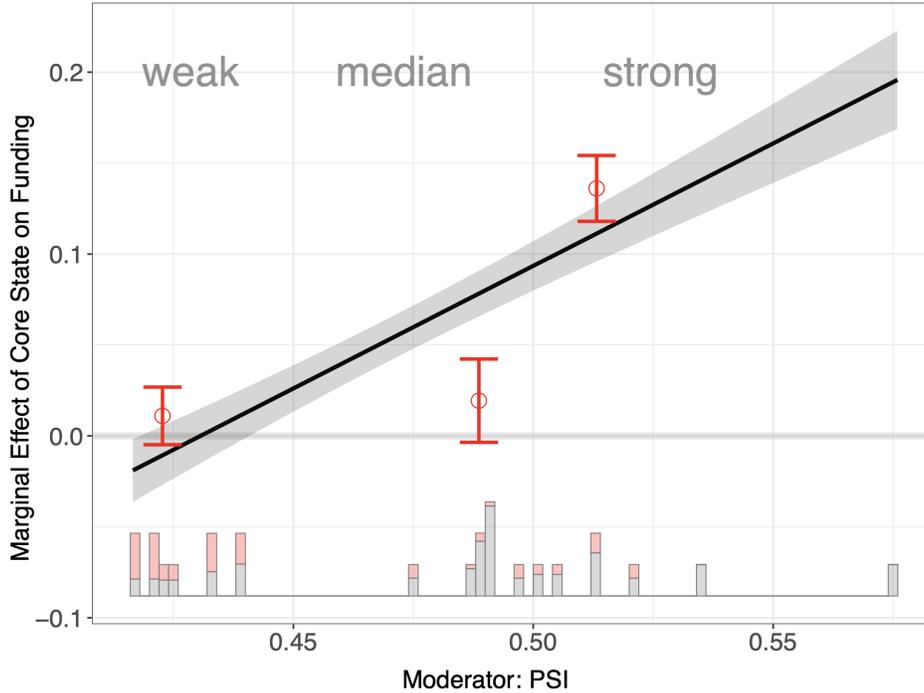
government does *not* support the party-building hypothesis. In other words, massive co-partisan constituency targeting is not the product of a weak party competitive environment but instead arises when the president’s party controls Congress.

Column (2) in Table 3 further demonstrates that the stronger the presidential party’s competitive standing, the more federal grants are distributed toward counties in the president’s core states. Specifically, the coefficient of the base-level core state is not significantly different from zero. In contrast, the coefficient of the core state is 0.030 when interacted with median party standing, and is 0.133 when interacted with strong party standing, which is significant at the 90% confidence level. Substantively, when the presidents are in a weak party competitive environment, a county in a core state would benefit equally as a county in a hostile state; however, when the presidents face a strong party standing, a county in a core state receives \$11.9 million more federal grants than a county in a hostile state.

Column (3) in Table 3 shows the marginal effect of core states conditional on the party standing in the state legislature. Although none of the coefficients regarding core-state interactions pass the 0.1 significant level, the point estimates demonstrate the same pattern as in Column (2)—core states receive disproportionately more benefits from federal grants when the president’s party is strong in the state legislature.

Figure 2 further presents marginal plots of the instantaneous effects of core states on federal grants allocation conditional on party strength. I follow the method of marginal effects of binning estimators introduced by Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu (2019) and generate the marginal plots. This method relaxes the linear interaction effect assumption and flexibly allows for heterogeneity in how the conditional marginal effect changes across values of the PSI. In addition, it offers protection against the potential problems of extrapolation or interpolation to areas where common support in the data is very sparse. Figure 2 demonstrates a growing effect of core states on federal grants distribution as party competitiveness becomes stronger. And, in the strong party standing bin, a significantly positive correlation between core states and more federal spending allocation appears.

Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Core-State Targeting on Party Strength



Similar results are recovered in the core-county analysis. Online Table A.4 shows that regardless of how we measure party strength, core counties within the core states are targeted with more federal grants under the condition of a strong party standing. This indicates that presidents do not execute core-supporter targeting in federal grants distribution for the purpose of party building. Therefore, we must consider other interpretations.

4.2 Electoral Purposes?

Along the lines of partisan bias, another closely related interpretation is that presidents, in divide-the-dollar politics, target core voters for electoral purposes. A president may target their core supporters to solidify their base in elections. To test this hypothesis, I conduct a simple analysis by including the interactions of the swing- and core-state variables with an election-year indicator. I use the 1-year adjustment to be consistent across analyses. For instance, the federal outlays in FY 2001 were proposed by a Democratic president's

Appropriations Bills in 2000 (election year). Therefore, the interaction term between *Core State* and *Election Year* can reveal the *ex-ante* influence of presidents on core-state targeting for electoral purposes. Here I also include the election year interaction with swing states. This aims to tease out how election years impact core-state targeting and swing state targeting differently. Breaking down by each year in a presidential term in a separate model, I also estimate the core-state targeting and swing-state targeting for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year in a presidential term.

Table 4 demonstrates the extent to which electoral concerns can explain core-state targeting. The base-line core state has a positive and statistically significant coefficient and this means that federal outlays flow to a president's core states constantly during off years. Moreover, the substantively small and statistically insignificant interaction term between core state and the election year indicator suggests that core-state targeting does not vary with the electoral calendar. In other words, core-state targeting is *not* used to boost electoral fortunes. Instead, presidents channel federal grants to their partisan base in a constant manner. By contrast, swing-state targeting is especially acute as the election year approaches. This result shows that the president's strategy of targeting voters for electoral gain is used primarily in swing states rather than core states.

Again, the core-county analysis recovers similar results (see Online Table A.6). During election years, core counties in both core states and swing states do not receive more grants compared to off years. Therefore, core-county targeting occurs regardless of the electoral calendar.

An alternative interpretation of this result is that swing state targeting is for electoral purposes, core-state targeting is for rewarding supporters. However, a model with both election year and party strength variables (see Online Table A.7) do not bear out this claim. When the government is divided, no states particularly benefit from federal grants distribution; when the government is unified, both core-state targeting and swing-state targeting are observed but not acute during election years. Therefore, election-year targeting becomes less apparent,

Table 4: Electoral Concerns in Explaining Core-State Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants	
	(1)	(2)
Core state	0.038*	
	(0.020)	
Core state × year 1		0.046*
		(0.023)
Core state × year 2		0.029
		(0.022)
Core state × year 3		0.056*
		(0.029)
Core state × election year	0.016	0.051**
	(0.026)	(0.023)
Swing state	0.031	
	(0.021)	
Swing state × years 1		0.036
		(0.023)
Swing state × years 2		0.025
		(0.025)
Swing state × years 3		0.060**
		(0.025)
Swing state × election year	0.058**	0.084***
	(0.029)	(0.025)
Controls	✓	✓
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Observations	76,916	76,916
R ²	0.894	0.894

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.
3. In the online appendix, Table A.5 displays the full results with control variables.

conditioning on party strength. Given the limits of remaining variance in this specification, which is equivalent to a triple interaction model, I hesitate to take an affirmative claim on this point. But it is evident that core-state targeting is not for the electoral purposes; rather, it occurs in a constant manner especially during unified government periods.

4.3 The Presidential Policy Priority

Rather than a function of party-building activities or electoral considerations, I argue that core-state targeting may reflect the president’s policy priorities and general ideological orientation. Policies and budgets that favor core constituencies are not the particularistic aims but the meaningful results of the president’s ideology-driven policy priorities.

Federal spending is executed by federal agencies, so the outcome of core-state targeting should be related to the structural characteristics of agencies. Empirically, I evaluate the flow of federal grants through federal agencies. Core-state targeting might *not* be caused by the political bias of presidents; rather, it might be caused by the policy priorities associated with agencies.

To consider the heterogeneity of federal funds allocated from different agencies, I rely on the original CFFR dataset. This dataset offers the opportunity to filter federal grants distribution by federal agency because it contains the precise amount of money from each agency across counties over years. Therefore, I benefit from the detailed agency codes and disaggregate the dataset into county-year-agency panel format, which allows me to tease out the impact of the ideological distinction of presidents from different parties.

I employ a series of empirical strategies to test the ideology alignment and policy priority approach that potentially explain core-state targeting. The first strategy is to run the same model specification in the agency-county-year panel dataset, while holding federal agency fixed. By adding agency fixed effects into the previous model, which has already fixed county and year, we can control the impact of different federal agencies on federal grants allocation. . . If core-state targeting holds after fixing county by agency, it means that presidential partisan bias drives core-state targeting, which indicates presidential particularism. But if core-state effects are absent, it means that the core-state benefit is driven by across-agency variation rather than within-agency variation. Formally,

$$\log(\text{outlays}_{i,j,t}) = \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Swing State}_{i,j,t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,j,t-1} \Phi + \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}. \quad (5)$$

where subscript i refers to county, j refers to agency, and t is year. And α_i , γ_j and δ_{t-1} fix county, agency, and year, separately. When we disaggregate the data to the county-agency-year level, roughly 3% of the outlays are zero, indicating instances in which a county receives no grants from a particular agency in a given year. In these instances, I replace \$0 with \$1 before making the natural logarithmic transformation. However, my findings do not hinge on any specific transformation of the dependent variable.

The second empirical strategy is to test whether the federal outlays disproportionately flow through specific agencies. It is important to test the heterogeneity of federal agencies in federal spending allocation. During pre-award stage of federal discretionary grants, agencies adjudicate among potential recipients (Napolio, 2021, 2–3). So the presidents would *ex-ante* request more federal grants from agencies that are ideologically closer or related to prioritized policies. This test offers new lights on the investigation of *ex-ante* vs *ex-post* influence of presidents on federal grants distribution (Berry, Burden and Howell, 2010). If it was *ex-ante*, the agencies closer to president’s ideology and policy priority would distribute more federal grants; if it was *ex-post*, the total funds allocated to each agency would not matter.

I deploy multiple measures of agency features. First, to identify the ideology of federal agencies, I rely on David Lewis’s (2008) agency categories in his book *The Politics of Presidential Appointments*. Lewis attempted to identify agencies that tend to be consistently liberal, consistently conservative, or neither. He surveyed around thirty expert academics and Washington observers and used their survey responses to estimate which agencies are consistently liberal or conservative. Online Table A.1 demonstrates that among 76 federal agencies, 22 are consistently liberal (e.g., the African Development Foundation, Commission on Civil Rights, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Labor, and Social Security Administration, etc.) and 23 are consistently conservative (e.g., the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Department of Defense, Department of Interior, National Security Council, and Small Business Administration, etc.). I code *Ideologically Aligned Agency* as “1” for liberal agencies during Democratic presidential administrations and conservative

agencies when Republican presidents are in the White House; “0” otherwise.

Second, to identify the policy priority associated with federal agencies, I create a continuous measure “agency priority level.” The Policy Agendas Project labeled each sentence in the State of the Union addresses into one of 21 major topics.⁷ I calculate the proportion of each major policy topic mentioned in each year by word count to measure policy priority level. I then obtain the agency priority level by matching the yearly policy priority level to each federal agency in each year (see Online Table A.8). It is worth noting that the agency priority level varies across agencies and years, thus this more nuanced variable better measures the policy priority of presidents over time.

Empirically, I add both an indicator of ideologically aligned agency and a continuous measure of agency priority level. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{i,j,t}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Ideologically Aligned Agency}_{j,t-1} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{Swing State}_{i,j,t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,j,t-1} \Phi + \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}. \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{i,j,t}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Agency Priority Level}_{j,t-1} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{Swing State}_{i,j,t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,j,t-1} \Phi + \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}. \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

The third empirical strategy is to interact the core state with ideologically aligned agency indicator and with agency priority level in separate models. If core-state targeting is a function of the president’s ideology and policy agenda, we would expect to see that federal grants flow to the core via agencies that are ideologically aligned with the president and are

⁷State of the Union Speeches. The Policy Agendas Project at the University of Texas at Austin, 2022. www.comparativeagendas.net. Accessed June 1, 2022.

associated with the president’s policy priorities. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{i,j,t}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Ideologically Aligned Agency}_{j,t-1} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} \times \text{Ideological Aligned Agency}_{j,t-1} + \beta_4 \text{Swing State}_{i,j,t-1} + \\ & \mathbb{X}_{i,j,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}. \end{aligned} \tag{8}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{i,j,t}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Agency Priority Level}_{j,t-1} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{Core State}_{i,j,t-1} \times \text{Agency Priority Level}_{j,t-1} + \beta_4 \text{Swing State}_{i,j,t-1} + \\ & \mathbb{X}_{i,j,t-1}\Phi + \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}. \end{aligned} \tag{9}$$

Table 5 presents the results. Column (1) shows that after holding the agency constant—adding agency fixed effects—the point estimate of the core state shrinks in magnitude and does not even approach standard thresholds for statistical significance. Substantively, it shows that a core state would not receive disproportionately more grants within a specific agency. This result suggests that core-state targeting happens only across agencies, not within agencies. It indicates that the structural features of federal agencies matter in federal grant allocation.

Furthermore, Columns (2) and (4) show that federal grants are directed disproportionately through agencies that are aligned with the president’s ideology and policy preferences. The coefficients of both ideologically aligned agency and agency priority level are positive and statistically significant. Substantively, agencies aligned with the president’s ideology and associated with president’s prioritized issues, on average, are given more money. This would suggest that presidents, with policy priorities in mind, employ *ex-ante* influence and channel more federal grants toward their preferred agencies. This would also suggest that presidents are not particularist; rather, they have different sets of policy agendas that they believe best serve the national interests.

Columns (3) and (5) provide further evidence on how agencies’ structural features impact federal grants distribution toward core states. Column (3) shows that if the core-state

Table 5: Ideology/Policy Approach in Explaining Core-State Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants				
	<i>Base</i>	<i>Ideology Alignment</i>		<i>Policy Priority</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Core state	0.017 (0.028)	0.017 (0.028)	-0.038 (0.031)	0.018 (0.028)	-0.015 (0.034)
ideologically aligned agency		0.050** (0.020)	-0.006 (0.024)		
Core state × ideologically aligned agency			0.257*** (0.062)		
Agency priority level				3.182*** (0.118)	2.983*** (0.169)
Core state × agency priority level					0.797** (0.369)
Swing state	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.025 (0.022)	-0.026 (0.022)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	612,992	612,992	612,992	612,992	612,992
R ²	0.495	0.495	0.497	0.496	0.497

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.
3. In the online appendix, Table A.9 displays the full results with control variables.

targeting is real; it occurs via federal agencies that are ideologically aligned with the sitting presidents. The interaction terms between the core state and the ideologically aligned agency are positive and statistically significant. Its magnitude is substantively larger than core-state targeting with no condition on the agency. It is evident that it is easier for presidents to funnel grants when an agency is ideologically congruent with the president, and this federal largesse is sent to the areas where the presidents' core supporters reside.

In Column (5), with a more nuanced continuous measure of agency priority level, similar results are recovered. Core-state targeting is more concentrated in those grants allocated through agencies that presidents prioritize. The statistically significant coefficient of the

interaction term, 0.797, means that if the president uses 10% of their State of the Union address to advocate for one specific policy, a core state would receive, on average, around 8% more federal grants that are channeled through the agency closely associated with that policy. Moreover, the positive and significant estimate of agency priority level suggests that agencies associated with a president’s higher policy priority allocate more federal grants across the states, even to the non-core states.

Similarly, the core counties within the core states are targeted with more federal grants but these benefits are allocated via agencies ideologically aligned with the presidents or associated with president’s policy priority (see Online Table A.10).

How can we interpret this result? For example, Cook County in Illinois receives a large amount of money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under Democratic presidents; and Blaine County in Montana receives a great deal of grants from the Department of the Interior under Republican presidents. Cook is urban, and Blaine is very rural. Democratic presidents plan to improve the infrastructure in urban Cook county, so the money is allocated through HUD. Republican presidents emphasize protecting and preserving the land in Blaine county, and the grants are distributed through the Department of Interior. Therefore, this evidence—that core-state targeting only occurs through ideologically aligned agencies—suggests that core-state targeting is a function of presidential ideology and policy priority. This interpretation is less cynical and may push back on the claim of presidential partisan particularism.

5 Conclusion

Concerns about perspective and strategy are at the center of longstanding debates surrounding the American presidency. Do presidents work on behalf of the nation as a whole? Or, instead, do they attend to the material interests of their partisan base?

Prominent claims about presidential particularism rest on the empirical observation that

core constituents of the president's party receive a disproportionate share of federal outlays. This paper further probes the interpretation of core-supporter targeting. It aims to call into question the strength and meaning of an intriguing finding and offer rich empirical evidence to reconsider the claim of presidential partisan particularism. A large body of formal theories on vote-buying does not support the core-voter logic. Instead, it suggests that targeting and rewarding core constituencies should not be presidents' rational actions to gain electoral advantage. Although core-state targeting is a robust empirical finding, its interpretation might be less cynical and less indicative of a particularistic presidency. The paper offers three sets of evidence. First, when testing additional hypotheses that should hold if the party-building interpretation were true, I find no evidence consistent with existing accounts of presidential particularism. Second, core-constituency targeting is not motivated by electoral concerns because it does not vary with the electoral calendar. Finally, I present additional evidence that suggests that presidential policy priorities and ideological commitments might better explain core-state targeting.

A great deal of uncertainty remains concerning the debate between the president as a national leader or a particularistic advocate. This paper arises from this puzzle and contributes to the previous literature in several ways. First, I call into question the strength of the conclusions made by other scholars around presidential particularism. I extend the electoral and party-building line of argument and derive an empirically testable hypothesis from the original interpretation. Also, I offer empirical evidence for other potential interpretations of core-state targeting. This is an empirical exercise to comprehensively explore the meaning of an interesting and bold finding that potentially has various interpretations. Second, by reviewing formal theoretical literature, I attempt to link the empirical evidence with respect to co-partisan-constituency targeting to the rich formal theories on vote-buying and distributive politics. This unlocks future research opportunities to develop our theoretical comprehension of presidential behavior with better formal models. Third, building upon Galvin's (2010) concept of parties' competitive standing—which relies on archival and anecdotal evidence—I

created a quantifiable measurement of party competitive standing. This enables a more rigorous explanation of presidential partisan motivation. Lastly, by disaggregating the original CFFR dataset into county-year-agency panel format, I uncover a mechanism showing that presidents primarily work with the agencies that are ideologically aligned with them and their policy priorities when distributing federal funds. And the agency-level analysis indicates that the presidents would more likely to *ex-ante* impact federal grants distribution via their preferred agencies.

To be clear, a variety of uncertainties persist. In all of this scholarship, the distinct influence of legislators, presidents, and bureaucrats remains a matter of ongoing dispute. Moreover, the precise nature of the bargaining relationship between these actors is often underspecified, and the choices in presidents' pursuit of policy objectives are often oversimplified. The generalizability of these findings to other periods of American political history remains unknown. Presently, though, one thing can be stated clearly: that strong supporters of the president's party receive more federal outlays, to the extent that the finding is true and robust, is not obvious evidence of presidential particularism; rather, it may simply be an artifact of the president's larger policy agenda that is channeled through a federal bureaucracy.

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Particularism or Policy?

When Distributive Outlays Flow to the President's Core Supporters

Online Appendix

Table A.1: Agency Ideologies Based on Expert Surveys, 1988–2005

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Table A.9: Ideology/Policy Approach in Explaining Core-County Targeting

Table A.1: Agency Ideologies Based on Expert Surveys, 1988–2005

<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Conservative</i>
African Development Foundation	Broadcasting Board of Governors/USIA	Commodity Futures Trading Commission
Appalachian Regional Commission	Department of Agriculture	Council of Economic Advisers
Commission on Civil Rights	Department of Energy	Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board
Consumer Product Safety Commission	Department of Justice	Department of Commerce
Corporation for National and Community Service	Department of State	Department of Defense
Council on Environmental Quality	Department of Transportation	Department of Homeland Security
Department of Education	Department of Veterans Affairs	Department of Interior
Department of Health and Human Services	Executive Residence at the White House	Department of the Air Force
Department of Housing and Urban Development	Farm Credit Administration	Department of the Army
Department of Labor	Federal Communications Commission	Department of the Navy
Environmental Protection Agency	Federal Election Commission	Department of the Treasury
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	Federal Housing Finance Board	Export-Import Bank of the United States
Federal Labor Relations Authority	Federal Maritime Commission	Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation
Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service	Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission	National Security Council
Merit Systems Protection Board	Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board	Nuclear Regulatory Commission
National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities	Federal Trade Commission	Office of Management and Budget
National Mediation Board	General Services Administration	Office of National Drug Control Policy
National Science Foundation	Inter-American Foundation	Office of the U.S. Trade Representative
Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	Overseas Private Investment Corporation
Peace Corps	National Archives and Records Administration	Securities and Exchange Commission
Social Security Administration	National Capital Planning Commission	Small Business Administration
U.S. Agency for International Development	National Credit Union Administration	Trade and Development Agency
	National Labor Relations Board	U.S. International Trade Commission
	Office of Administration	
	Office of Government Ethics	
	Office of Personnel Management	
	Office of Science and Technology Policy	
	Office of Special Counsel	
	National Transportation Safety Board	
	Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation	
	Railroad Retirement Board	

Table A.2: Extension of Kriner and Reeves’s Analysis of Core-County Targeting

	Dependent Variable: Logged Federal Grants	
	<i>K&R Replication</i>	<i>K&R Adjustment</i>
	(1)	(2)
Core State	0.036*** (0.007)	0.023*** (0.009)
Core County	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.010)
Swing State	0.026*** (0.006)	0.037*** (0.008)
Core County × Core State	0.054*** (0.011)	0.040*** (0.015)
Core County × Swing State	0.040*** (0.009)	0.031** (0.013)
MC from president’s party	0.015*** (0.004)	0.009* (0.005)
MC from majority party	0.026*** (0.004)	0.021*** (0.006)
Committee chair	-0.030*** (0.009)	-0.054*** (0.016)
Appropriations / Way & Means	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.024*** (0.008)
County population (logged)	0.231*** (0.031)	0.230*** (0.047)
Poverty rate	0.005*** (0.001)	0.004** (0.002)
Income per capita	0.005** (0.002)	-0.0001 (0.003)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Observations	76,296	76,278
R ²	0.953	0.896

Notes:

- *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
- Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

**Table A.3: Party-Building Approach in Explaining Core-State Targeting
(Full Table)**

	DV: Logged Federal Grants		
	<i>Federal</i>	<i>Federal & State</i>	<i>State</i>
	<i>Level</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Level</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Core state	0.009 (0.025)	0.00005 (0.042)	-0.014 (0.039)
Core state × unified government	0.126** (0.053)		
Core state × median party standing		0.030 (0.070)	
Core state × strong party standing		0.133* (0.067)	
Core state × median party standing in state			0.050 (0.033)
Core state × strong party standing in state			0.096 (0.094)
Swing State	0.049** (0.019)	0.049** (0.020)	0.043** (0.019)
MC from president's party	0.010 (0.008)	0.010 (0.008)	0.009 (0.009)
MC from majority party	0.017* (0.009)	0.017* (0.010)	0.019** (0.009)
Committee chair	-0.031 (0.029)	-0.031 (0.029)	-0.035 (0.028)
Appropriations / Ways and Means	-0.020 (0.012)	-0.020 (0.012)	-0.021 (0.014)
County population (logged)	0.256*** (0.095)	0.257*** (0.094)	0.251** (0.105)
Poverty rate	0.004 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Income per capita	-0.0002 (0.002)	-0.0002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)
Median party standing in state			-0.008 (0.017)
Strong party standing in state			0.020 (0.027)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	76,916	76,916	74,591
R ²	0.894	0.894	0.892

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

Table A.4: Party-Building Approach in Explaining Core-County Targeting

	Dependent Variable: Logged Federal Grants		
	<i>Federal Level</i>	<i>Federal & State Level</i>	<i>State Level</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Core state	0.022** (0.009)	0.020** (0.009)	0.018** (0.009)
Swing state	0.049*** (0.007)	0.050*** (0.007)	0.042*** (0.007)
Core county	0.005 (0.007)	0.005 (0.007)	0.005 (0.007)
Core county × core state	-0.008 (0.012)	-0.014 (0.012)	-0.034** (0.015)
Core county × core state × unified government	0.132*** (0.012)		
Core county × core state × median party standing		0.046** (0.018)	
Core county × core state × strong party standing		0.140*** (0.013)	
Core county × core state × median party standing in state			0.063*** (0.013)
Core county × core state × strong party standing in state			0.072*** (0.017)
MC from president's party	0.008 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)
MC from majority party	0.013** (0.005)	0.012** (0.005)	0.016*** (0.005)
Committee chair	-0.052*** (0.013)	-0.052*** (0.013)	-0.053*** (0.012)
Appropriations / Ways & Means	-0.021*** (0.006)	-0.021*** (0.006)	-0.021*** (0.006)
County population (logged)	0.249*** (0.021)	0.251*** (0.021)	0.246*** (0.021)
Poverty rate	0.004*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
Income per capita	-0.00004 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Median party standing in state			-0.005 (0.006)
Strong party standing in state			0.035*** (0.009)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	76,278	76,278	73,953
R ²	0.896	0.896	0.894

Notes:

- *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
- Robust standard errors are clustered by county.

**Table A.5: Electoral Concerns in Explaining Core-State Targeting
(Full Table)**

	DV: Logged Federal Grants	
	(1)	(2)
Core state	0.038*	
	(0.020)	
Core state × year 1		0.046*
		(0.023)
Core state × year 2		0.029
		(0.022)
Core state × year 3		0.056*
		(0.029)
Core state × election year	0.016	0.051**
	(0.026)	(0.023)
Swing state	0.031	
	(0.021)	
Swing state × years 1		0.036
		(0.023)
Swing state × years 2		0.025
		(0.025)
Swing state × years 3		0.060**
		(0.025)
Swing state × election year	0.058**	0.084***
	(0.029)	(0.025)
MC from president's party	0.011	0.011
	(0.008)	(0.008)
MC from majority party	0.021*	0.021*
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Committee chair	-0.037	-0.037
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Appropriations / Ways & Means	-0.024*	-0.024*
	(0.013)	(0.013)
County population (logged)	0.235**	0.232**
	(0.098)	(0.098)
Poverty rate	0.004	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Income per capita	-0.0004	-0.0004
	(0.002)	(0.002)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Observations	76,916	76,916
R ²	0.894	0.894

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

Table A.6: Electoral Concerns in Explaining Core-County Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants
	(1)
Core state	0.022** (0.009)
Swing state	0.037*** (0.008)
Core County	-0.010 (0.010)
Core county × core state	0.045*** (0.015)
Core county × swing state	0.032** (0.013)
Core county × core state × election year	-0.020 (0.012)
Core county × swing state × election year	-0.005 (0.015)
MC from president's party	0.009* (0.005)
MC from majority party	0.020*** (0.005)
Committee chair	-0.054*** (0.013)
Appropriations / Ways & Means	-0.024*** (0.006)
County population (logged)	0.230*** (0.021)
Poverty rate	0.004*** (0.001)
Income per capita	-0.0001 (0.001)
County Fixed Effects	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	76,278
R ²	0.896

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by county.

Table A.7: Electoral Concerns in Unified and Divided Periods

	DV: Logged Federal Grants		
	<i>All</i>	<i>Unified Government</i>	<i>Divided Government</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Core state	0.038* (0.020)	0.139*** (0.032)	0.017 (0.029)
Core state × election years	0.016 (0.026)	0.054 (0.042)	0.007 (0.033)
Swing state	0.031 (0.021)	0.057** (0.026)	0.042 (0.030)
Swing state × election years	0.058** (0.029)	0.004 (0.029)	0.051 (0.034)
MC from president's party	0.011 (0.008)	0.012 (0.008)	-0.011 (0.014)
MC from majority party	0.021* (0.011)	0.017 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.013)
Committee chair	-0.037 (0.029)	-0.005 (0.040)	-0.044 (0.031)
Appropriations / Ways & Means	-0.024* (0.013)	-0.004 (0.012)	-0.029* (0.017)
County population (logged)	0.235** (0.098)	0.244* (0.127)	0.226** (0.105)
Poverty rate	0.004 (0.002)	0.001 (0.005)	0.005* (0.003)
Income per capita	-0.0004 (0.002)	0.008* (0.004)	-0.005** (0.002)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	76,916	24,631	52,285
R ²	0.894	0.953	0.872

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

Table A.8: Matching of Federal Agencies and Policy Topics

Federal Agency	Associated Policy Topic
Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board	Transportation
Commission of Civil Rights	Civil Rights
Commodity Futures Trading Commission	Economy
Denali Commission/Delta Regional Authority	Public Lands
Department of Agriculture	Agriculture
Department of Commerce	Economy
Department of Defense	Defense
Department of Education	Education
Department of Energy	Energy
Department of Health and Human Services	Health
Department of Homeland Security	Immigration
Department of Housing and Urban Development	Housing
Department of Justice	Law and Crime
Department of Labor	Labor
Department of State	International Affairs
Department of the Interior	Public Lands
Department of the Treasury	Economy
Department of Transportation	Transportation
Department of Veterans Affairs	Housing
Elections Assistance Commission	Civil Rights
Environmental Protection Agency	Environment
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	Civil Rights
Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service	Government Operations
Federal Trade Commission	Economy
Fellowship and Foundation	Education
General Services Administration	Government Operations
Government Printing Office	Government Operations
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	Technology
National Credit Union Administration	Economy
National Gallery of Art	Culture
National Labor Relations Board	Labor
National Science Foundation	Education
Office of Personnel Management	Government Operations
Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation	Social Welfare
Railroad Retirement Board	Transportation
Securities and Exchange Commission	Economy
Small Business Administration	Economy
Social Security Administration	Social Welfare
United States Agency for International Development	International Affairs
United States Institute of Peace	International Affairs

Notes: The agencies that have no clear association with any policy topics are as follows: Appalachian Regional Commission, Corporation for National and Community Service, Federal Communications Commission, Federal Maritime Commission, Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and Overseas Private Investment Corporation.

**Table A.9: Ideology/Policy Approach in Explaining Core-State Targeting
(Full Table)**

	DV: Logged Federal Grants				
	<i>Base</i>	<i>Ideology Alignment</i>		<i>Policy Priority</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Core state	0.017 (0.028)	0.017 (0.028)	-0.038 (0.031)	0.018 (0.028)	-0.015 (0.034)
ideologically aligned agency		0.050** (0.020)	-0.006 (0.024)		
Core state × ideologically aligned agency			0.257*** (0.062)		
Agency priority level				3.182*** (0.118)	2.983*** (0.169)
Core state × agency priority level					0.797** (0.369)
Swing state	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.025 (0.022)	-0.026 (0.022)
MC from president's party	0.020 (0.013)	0.020 (0.013)	0.019 (0.013)	0.021 (0.013)	0.021 (0.013)
MC from majority party	0.024* (0.014)	0.024* (0.014)	0.024* (0.014)	0.022 (0.014)	0.022 (0.014)
Committee chair	0.056 (0.046)	0.057 (0.046)	0.056 (0.046)	0.058 (0.046)	0.057 (0.046)
Appropriations / Way & Means	-0.002 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)
County population (logged)	0.477*** (0.068)	0.477*** (0.068)	0.472*** (0.068)	0.488*** (0.068)	0.486*** (0.068)
Poverty rate	0.014*** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
income per capita	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	612,992	612,992	612,992	612,992	612,992
R ²	0.495	0.495	0.496	0.497	0.497

Notes:

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

2. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

Table A.10: Ideology/Policy Approach in Explaining Core-County Targeting

	DV: Logged Federal Grants		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Core state	-0.022 (0.014)	-0.024* (0.014)	-0.027** (0.013)
Swing state	-0.022** (0.010)	-0.022** (0.010)	-0.011 (0.010)
Core county	0.003 (0.010)	0.003 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)
Core county * core state	0.065*** (0.018)	0.010 (0.018)	0.025 (0.018)
Ideologically aligned agency		0.010 (0.011)	
Core county * core state * ideologically aligned agency		0.301*** (0.020)	
Agency priority level			2.396*** (0.080)
Core county * core state * agency priority level			0.870*** (0.139)
MC from president's party	0.015** (0.007)	0.014* (0.007)	0.009 (0.007)
MC from majority party	0.025*** (0.008)	0.025*** (0.008)	0.008 (0.007)
Committee chair	0.026 (0.019)	0.026 (0.019)	0.052*** (0.019)
Appropriations / Ways & Means	-0.004 (0.010)	-0.004 (0.010)	-0.020** (0.010)
County population (logged)	0.491*** (0.034)	0.488*** (0.034)	0.462*** (0.037)
Poverty rate	0.016*** (0.002)	0.016*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)
Income per capita	0.003* (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)	0.004*** (0.002)
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	607,050	607,050	607,050
R ²	0.497	0.497	0.622

Notes:

- *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
- Robust standard errors are clustered by county.