

# Presidential Partisan Particularism: A Reconsideration

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## Abstract

Rather than faithful stewards of national objectives, some claim, presidents display distinctly “particularistic” tendencies. Presenting evidence that the president’s core constituencies regularly receive a disproportionate share of federal outlays, Kriner and Reeves (2015) argue that presidents routinely privilege partisan and electoral considerations. This paper reconsiders the meaning of this empirical finding. Theoretically, it raises questions about the utility of strengthening a party by buying votes from the presidents’ core voters. And empirically, it shows that the underlying patterns of partisan targeting do not accord with standard accounts of party building activity. Co-partisans are especially likely to reap the rewards of federal largesse when their party has an especially strong hold on the federal government, precisely when party building activities are least likely to occur. This paper also tests the possibility that the presidents achieve universalistic ends by particularistic means, and find that ideological considerations may better explain the main empirical finding that undergirds claims about presidential particularism.

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# 1 Introduction

It is a conventional claim 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).<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, scholars have come to question this view. In the last several years, a body of literature on the American presidency alleges that the chief executives 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 2016; Stratmann and Wojnilower 2015). A debate on the orientation of the chief executives – whether they are national leaders or particularistic statesmen – has opened up in the study of the American presidency.

Scholars have examined a number of factors that shift presidential behavior to a particularistic pattern (Kriner and Reeves 2015; McCarty 2000), one of which is partisan motivation. Kriner and Reeves (2015) emphasize the president’s role as a partisan leader, and they draw evidence from the divide-the-dollar politics to show that presidents influence the budgetary distribution to channel federal grants disproportionately to counties located in core states that solidly back the president’s party in recent elections. Accordingly, they claim that the president’s national outlook is clouded by partisan considerations.

How exactly should we interpret the meaning of the main empirical findings that undergirds claims about presidential particularism? Kriner and Reeves argue that it reflects efforts by presidents to boost their electoral fortune and build their party; that presidents, as it were, “are not national leaders, but rather predominantly leaders of the partisan coalitions that elected them to office” (Kriner and Reeves 2015, 168). They also cited Wood’s partisan theory of presidential representation to support their interpretation: “Having achieved electoral success, presidents are anxious to pursue their most favored policies and reward core supporters with benefits that accrue from election outcomes” (Wood 2009, 36).

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Fitzpatrick (1931) mentioned that founding fathers explicitly expressed whose interests the American presidents ought to serve and represent, which was echoed by President Woodrow Wilson (1908) by saying “the president is the representative of no constituency, but of the the whole people; this perspective of the universalistic presidency is also routinely advocated by legal scholars, like Elena Kagan (2001) expressed the same view before being appointed as the Supreme Court Justice.

This paper reconsiders Kriner and Reeves’s interpretation. First, it underscores the difficulties of reconciling this documented pattern of federal spending with standard formal accounts of vote buying. It then reassesses the evidence of core state targeting in both county-level and district-level data on federal funds distribution. After adjusting and extending Kriner and Reeves’ data, I find that the size of the core state effect attenuates noticeably. I then test an additional hypothesis that should hold if Kriner and Reeves’ preferred explanation is correct. If the documented effect reflects party building activities, other scholars have shown (Galvin 2010), it should be particularly large when the president’s 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—precisely when party building efforts can be expected to wane. I then present evidence that the documented effect may simply reflect the president’s policy priorities and ideological orientation. When conditioning on the agencies charged with actually disbursing these federal outlays (Berry and Gersen 2017; Krause and Meier 2003; Krause and O’Connell 2016), the core state effect entirely disappears. Rather than evidence of party building, this central finding appears to be an artifact of presidents’ efforts to direct federal outlays in ways that reflect their larger policy agendas.

## **2 Partisan Particularism and Its Interpretations**

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, but 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 hold 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 wellbeing 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 this 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 are 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 American presidency incisively assumes that the commander-in-chief, on behalf of the United States in a volatile and complex world stage, is supposed to be more national in orientation (Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008; Wildavsky 1966), Lowande, Jenkins, and Clarke (2016) extend the particularistic claim into the realm of foreign affairs. They provide evidence from the U.S. trade policies between 1986 and 2006 and find that presidents strategically target trade protections to industries in politically valuable states.

In order 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 whole nation at large. The interest of presidents' co-partisan constituencies stand out as one major factor (Kriner and Reeves 2015; McCarty 2000). Because the president as the party leader may be more inclined to be responsive to the needs and wants of their core partisan base.

Indeed, the literature on the president-party relationship claims that modern 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). What a president pursues is not only himself doing well in presidential elections, but also his fellow co-partisan officials doing well in congressional elections and local elections. An example of this coalition building is the existence of presidential “coattails”; that is, a popular presidential candidate is able to increase the winning probability of his co-partisan officials in congressional elections. Furthermore, presidents have ample means and strong capability to shape federal budgets at both the proposal and

implementation stages (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). So with the goal of strengthening their 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. Especially in the era of increasing partisan polarization, 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 Charnock 2012).

Consistent with the president's role as a partisan leader, Kriner and Reeves (2015) find empirical 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, this difference is consistent with some other empirical studies asserting that federal benefits are disproportionately targeted toward core voters (Chen 2008; Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa 2006; Levitt and Snyder 1995).

A key theoretical question is how to interpret why presidents pursue budgetary policies that disproportionately reward core states. This paper aims at further interpreting the core constituency benefits and rethinking the presidential particularism. On the one hand, the core state targeting can be interpreted as a co-partisan bias. Presidents, as partisans-in-chief, deliberately channel federal funding toward the core states in order to keep their party competitive in election and sharpen their party brand. On the other hand, the disproportionate federal funding allocated toward the core states can also be explained by an ideological approach. The federal funds are actually driven by president's ideological priority and agency preference. The core state targeting is a coincidence that federal fundings are allocated to the places where the residents happen to be presidents' co-partisans. This less cynical interpretation may not indicate that there is a bias in presidents' outlook; the budgetary tilting toward the core does not mean a particularistic aim but the consequential results of president's ideology-driven policy priorities.

Scholars have made efforts to explain the co-partisan targeting in other political contexts

(Fouirnaies and Mutle-Eren 2015), but the empirical evidence on its interpretation has yet fully explored in American politics. This paper contributes the literature by offering empirical tests for all the possible interpretations. But before the empirical exercise, it is worthwhile revisiting the theoretical interpretation of the co-partisan monetary targeting.

### 3 Formal Theory on Distributive Politics and Vote-Buying

One possible interpretation of the correlation between core states and disproportionate federal grants reception rests on electoral incentives. Either for presidents themselves in the later presidential elections or for their co-partisans in the congressional contests, presidents may build their party's electoral competitiveness by targeting more federal grants toward the core. In other words, the presidents pursue budgetary policies that channel more budgetary largesse toward the co-partisans in the hope of their votes in return. In the formal 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 power to allocate public goods) offer side payments to voters (or legislators) in exchange for their votes in elections (or floor votes). Federal budgetary outlays certainly can be seen as such payments that are, using the terms in Baron (2006), "politically-valuable resources." The essence of the vote buying literature is whether allocating targetable benefits to swing voters or to core voters maximizes electoral prospects.

Most vote buying models stand in the line of "swing voter logic." This logic 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 moderate. 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. Later, Dixit and Longregan (1995, 1996) offer a general model of how federal benefits are targeted, and also show that the parties' apportionments are driven by the density of swing voters. Alexander, Berry, and Howell (2016) offer empirical support for this claim.

Stokes (2005) extends the swing voter logic to a multi-period model. Stokes’s theory views the machine-voter interaction as a repeated prisoner’s dilemma. In each stage (election), voters would either vote for the party that allocates them public goods (comply) or vote against it (defect); while the political machine would either reward or not reward voters. In a one-shot game, the equilibrium would be mutual defection – no reward for the voter and no vote for the party. However, in the repeated and infinite sequence of elections, a grim-trigger strategy yields a party-voter exchange: voters vote for the party that bribes them. The loyal voters do not meet the equilibrium condition, yet swing voters are involved in the exchange because they are cheap to buy. Stokes argues against the core voter logic by claiming, “voters who are predisposed in favor of the machine on partisan or ideological grounds cannot credibly threaten to punish their favored party if it withholds rewards. Therefore the party should not waste rewards on them” (2005, 317).

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, loyal voters targeting can be seen as a safer investment compared to the swing voters aiming. Hence, core targeting is a rational strategy for risk-averse players, whereas “if candidates are risk-acceptant as opposed to risk-averse then they may adopt less stabilizing strategies – *i.e.* invest more in swing groups” (Cox McCubbins 1986, 381). Furthermore, Cox and McCubbins find challengers in general more willing than incumbents to take risks on policy positions, so presidents as incumbent policy makers should be prone to take a safer strategy and invest more in their cores.

However, Cox (2009) himself conceded that compared with the mainstream swing voter models that explain well 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 for the U.S. two-party political system. Therefore, formal theory literature reminds us that directing federal grants to core voters may not necessarily help presidents maximize their electoral prospects.

## 4 Empirical Interpretation of Core State Targeting

This section proceeds in three parts. First, I revisit the main empirical finding that supports contentions about partisan bias in distributive outlays. Second, I investigate whether this pattern of spending accords with existing accounts of the president’s party building activities. Lastly, I demonstrate that the federal outlay distribution actually reflects the president’s ideological policy agenda. Collectively, this whole section offers an empirical reconsideration of the partisan particularist claim about American presidency.

### 4.1 Replication

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 amount 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 the presidential particularism 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 funds received by counties or congressional districts in a given year. For the county-level analysis, I treat the federal grants distribution as a direct and proper measurement because it is part of the federal discretionary funds that can effectively reveal president’s will and priority. Each year, the federal government allocates hundreds of billions of dollars in grants to fund innumerable projects across the country. According to the latest available Consolidated Federal Funds Report<sup>2</sup>, in 2010, the federal government awarded around \$683 billion grants, accounting for 13.4% of all federal expenditure.

Kriner and Reeves utilize a differences-in-differences design with county and year fixed effects to investigate the effect of swing states and the effect of core states on federal grants allocation. In

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<sup>2</sup>Please see, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2011/governments/cffr-10.pdf>, accessed Jun 2020.



their formal specification,

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

the main variables of interest are denoted as follows. *Core State* is coded 1 if that the president’s party achieved an average 55% or more of the two-party vote in the previous three presidential election cycles in this county, and 0 otherwise; and *Swing State* is coded 1 where the losing candidate won an average 45% or more of the two-party vote over the past three election years. Hence, the baseline to compare is the hostile states. The control variables,  $\mathbb{X}$ , include politician specific controls (whether its member of Congress is from president’s party, from majority party, a Committee chair, in the Appropriations or Ways and Means Committees)<sup>3</sup> and geographic specific controls (population, poverty and income per capita). The inclusion of county fixed effects,  $\alpha_i$ , controls for all time-invariant county characteristics – both observed and unobserved; and the inclusion of year,  $\delta_t$ , controls for time trend. The necessary parallel assumption here in this context is that the federal grants should be allocated in the same trend and pattern across the nation.

Based upon the Kriner and Reeves’ research design, I make several adjustments. First, following others (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 before, I match federal grants spent in year  $t$  to the political and demographic characteristics of year  $t - 1$ . For example, the federal outlays in 2001, when George W. Bush was the president, were decided by the 2000 appropriations budget proposed by Democratic President Bill Clinton and passed in a Republican Congress. To make no mistake, Kriner and Reeves (2015) did follow the same approach for the congressional variables in their analysis (e.g., is the county represented by a member of the majority party, a member of the president’s party, etc.). On the measure of a core state or a swing state, however, Kriner and Reeves did not include the 1-year lag (rather, they measure whether a state was a core state based on the president in power during the bulk of the fiscal year itself). Given arguments in

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<sup>3</sup>For the district-level controls in county-level data, there is a match strategy that needs to mention. More than 80% of counties match uniquely into a single congressional district. For the 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.

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 have known, on whether the *ex ante* presidential influence on the federal outlays is greater than the *ex post*, or vice versa, we should at least double check how the adjustment of using 1-year lag on the measure of a core state and a swing state would impact our estimate of presidential particularism. Therefore, I use this adjusted model specification, formally written as,

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

Second, 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 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 on county. In my reassessment, however, a core state is the main variable of interest, therefore, I cluster by state in order to get the most accurate estimate.

Third, I test the same model specification in the congressional district level dataset, using the Federal Assistance Award Data System (FAADS) during the same period of time (1984-2008). This dataset includes the total awards by each non-defense federal program to the 435 congressional districts in each fiscal year. In total, the dataset includes 10,755 valid observations over 25 years. This paper’s empirical analysis utilizes both county-level and congressional-district-level data to enhance robustness and accuracy.<sup>4</sup> For the district-level analysis, the dependent variable is the log transformed federal discretionary funds of high-variation programs, a methodology widely used by other scholars (Levitt and Snyder 1995; Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I use both county-level and district-level data because the two sources have unique strengths and weaknesses. For the county-level data, unlike congressional districts, the boundaries of counties are constant through the time period I investigate, without considering the redrawn districts caused by the decennial census. Another advantage of the CFFR dataset is that it includes defense-related outlays that reflect the category of federal grants most amenable to presidential pork-barreling. However, one limitation of county-level research design is that most urban counties with dense populations are subdivided into several different districts. Additionally, most of the federal grants are directly distributed toward congressional districts, not specific counties. Thus the FAADS district level data can yield a more accurate measure of the distributive patterns of federal funds. In short, utilizing both level of data can also effectively compensate for major weaknesses of the two sources of evidence.

<sup>5</sup>The FAADS data include federal spending by broad-based entitlement programs, the allocation of which are decided by formula. In order to separate the entitlement programs from the programs of discretionary spending, I adopt the method used by Levitt and Snyder (1995, 1997) and calculate coefficients of variation in district-level

Table 1: Replication of Kriner and Reeves’s Estimate of Federal Funds Distribution

	<i>Dependent variable: Logged Federal Funds</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	K & R	K & R	District Level
	Replication	Adjustment	(FAADS)
<b>Core state</b>	0.064*** (0.006)	0.042** (0.018)	0.012 (0.012)
Swing state	0.039*** (0.006)	0.046** (0.019)	0.032 (0.022)
MC from president’s party	0.020*** (0.004)	0.012 (0.009)	0.030 (0.023)
MC from majority party	0.025*** (0.004)	0.021* (0.011)	0.036 (0.038)
Committee chair	−0.021** (0.010)	−0.037 (0.029)	−0.098 (0.084)
Appropriations / W&M	−0.010* (0.005)	−0.024* (0.013)	0.042* (0.023)
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)	
Fixed Effect	County, Year	County, Year	District, Year
Observations	76,937	76,937	10,755
Number of unique groups	3,082	3,082	1,588
Within R <sup>2</sup>	0.619	0.602	0.116

*Notes:*

1. \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.
2. 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 Models (2) and (3).
3. Models (2) and (3) use the year  $t - 1$  adjustment, Model (1) does not adjust for this.

Table 1 presents the effects of core state on federal grants distribution in the county level and high-variation program spending in the congressional district level. 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 year  $t - 1$  adjustment and standard errors clustered by states. I find the effect of core state targeting shrinks in the corrected model: the coefficient of *Core State* is 0.042 with 95% confidence level. Substantively, all else being equal, counties in states that strongly voted for the president’s party in recent three elections are allocated 4.2% more federal grants than counties in non-core states. Column (3) shows the same model specification as Column (2) but in congressional-district-level dataset. I do not find the same core state effect in the district level. In short, compared to Kriner and Reeves’ finding that counties in core states receive 6.4% more in federal grant funding, on average, than a similar county in a noncore state, I find the core state targeting effect is smaller in magnitude.

## 4.2 Is Core State Targeting Evidence of Party Building?

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 a 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. The ultimate goal of a president as a party leader, after all, is to enhance the competitive standing of his party. The competitive imbalance between the parties, therefore, 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 with respect to 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 basic trade-off between solidifying the partisan core

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spending for each program and use the coefficients to separate programs into *low-variation* programs and *high-variation* programs, and the cutoff coefficient is 3/4.

and achieving long-term and grand political objectives. The president's party standing plays an imperative role in how the president balances this compromise. On the one hand, the minority-party presidents ought to have strong incentives to change their political environment, so they should engage in those political strategies that solidify their partisan bases. Its particular reason is shown in empirical evidence that voters reward incumbent presidents (or their party's nominee) for increased federal spending in their communities (Kriner and Reeves 2012). 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 on their party. Hence, an empirically testable corollary I can generate from this assumption is that a strong party standing yields less party building activities from the president. It follows that if Kriner and Reeves are correct in their assessment of partisan particularism, core states should receive a smaller share of federal benefits when the president is faced with a stronger party competitive environment.

*Party Building Corollary: If supporting core voters is in the reason of 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.*

According to this party building corollary, weak party competitive standing incentivizes a president to achieve federal policies that benefit his co-partisans with the aim of strengthening his partisan base. In the distributive politics data, I do not find any evidence in support of this corollary.

Empirically, the goal here is to test the effect of core states on federal spending distribution conditional on the party competitive environment, and I use multiple measures to quantify the president's party strength. The first measure is simple and direct, that is divided *v.s.* unified government. A unified government indicates a strong party strength or a majority party owned by the president. Congress is the central venue in which presidents are trying to advance policy at the national level. When both chambers of Congress are controlled by the president's party, the president just focuses on pushing forward his preferred policies. But if Congress is possessed by the other party, presidents cannot easily get their agenda through (Cameron 2000; Howell 2003). Hence, the core here is that presidents need to do something else to change the composition of Congress. If

directing federal benefits more toward the core states has the effect of improving partisan strength within Congress in later years, we should expect them to do that costly activity when their party is weak in Congress. For example, from Eisenhower to Clinton’s first term, the Democratic Party was conceived as 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 priority (Howell 2003). In other words, the president who faces a unified government is less likely to allocate more funds toward his co-partisans in order to solidify his core bases.

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

$$\begin{aligned} \log(\text{outlays}_{it}) = & \beta_1 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Core State}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Unified}_{t-1} + \mathbb{X}_{i,t-1} \Phi \\ & + \alpha_i + \delta_{t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where  $\text{Core State}_{i,t-1}$  is the base level term that indicates the 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 state on spending allocation conditional on a stronger party strength. The constitutive term of  $\text{Unified}_{t-1}$  is left off of the equation as it is included in the year fixed effects. The party building corollary predicts  $\beta_2$  being significantly less than 0.

I also create a more comprehensive and continuous measure of party 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 party, partisan share of governorship. Fortunately, all these components to measure partisan competitive imbalance are quantifiable as

well, I therefore construct a Party Standing Index (PSI) for the years 1984-2008. Party Standing Index is comprised of five evenly weighted components calculated each year.<sup>6</sup> As shown in Table 2, two federal components are congressional seats share in both House and Senate. Three state components are governorship and state legislative seat share in both state upper and lower chambers. The index is based on the two-party evaluation so third-party candidates are not included. Roughly speaking, a PSI larger than 0.5 indicates a strong party standing.

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

Congress .....	40% (Senate: 20%; House: 20%)
State Legislature .....	40% (upper chamber: 20%; lower chamber: 20%)
Governor .....	20%

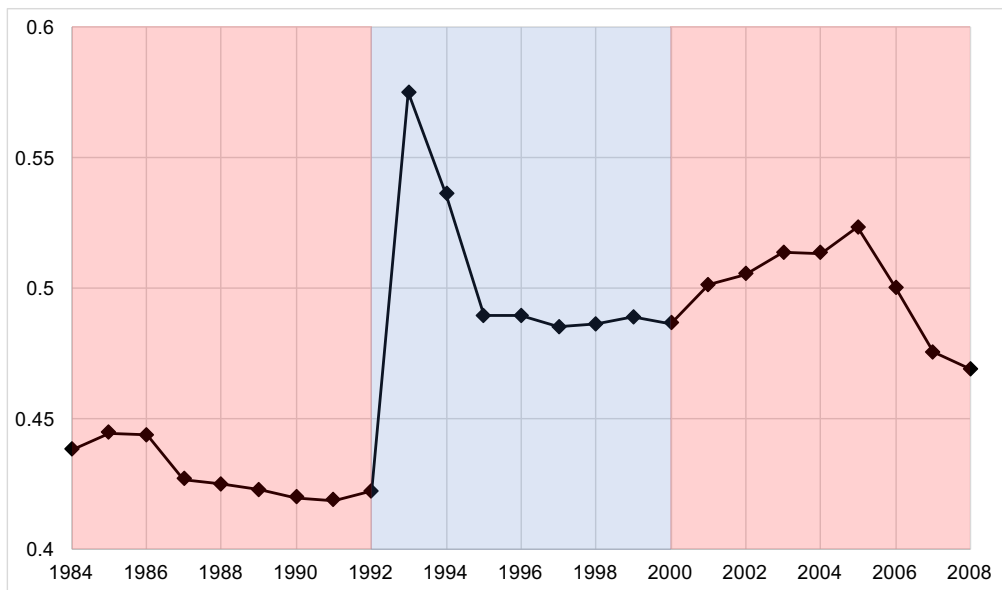


Figure 1: Party Standing Index, 1984-2008

Next, we discretize the continuous moderator PSI into three bins (corresponding to the three terciles separately), generate a dummy variable for each bin and denote them “Weak”, “Medium”, and “Strong” party standing. The mean values of PSI for three bins are 0.429, 0.484, and 0.521,

<sup>6</sup>Ceaser and Saldin (2005) created a Major Party Index, using a similar calculation.

and the medium for three bins are 0.425, 0.486, and 0.513 respectively. Weak party standing years include four years of Reagan’s second term and George H. W. Bush’s four years; strong party standing years are the first two years of Clinton administration and the first six years of George W. Bush administration, which just happen to be the unified government years; the other eight years are middle party standing years. I further test the party standing corollary with this three-dummy multiplicative interaction model. The model specification is:

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

where  $\text{Core State}_{i,t-1}$  is the base level term that here indicates the effect of core state targeting conditional on a weak party competitive environment. The two constitutive terms of  $\text{Medium}_{t-1}$  and  $\text{Strong}_{t-1}$  have been included in the year dummies,  $\delta_{t-1}$ . The party building corollary predicts  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  being significantly less than 0 and  $|\beta_2| < |\beta_3|$ .

If the Party Building Corollary is true, we should observe that presidents target their core constituencies less disproportionately (or more evenly across the board) when his party is in a stronger competitive standing. During such conditions, after all, presidents have less of an urgent need to solidify or reward their cores by channelling more federal benefits. Strikingly, however, the results of multiplicative interaction models, as shown in Table 3, suggest just the opposite. Both simple tests of unified government interaction and the more comprehensive test of Party Standing Index three-bin interaction suggest that core constituents benefit most when their party is strongest.

Column (1) in Table 3 shows that the counties located 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 95% confidence interval, indicates a strong party competitive environment yields around 12.6% more in allocating grants toward core states than non-core states than a divided government scenario does. Column (3) shows the congressional district level results. Although coefficients of interests are not significant, the point estimates predict the similar trend that core state targeting occurs more likely when the presidents enjoy a stronger party strength. At least, the district level data also reject the



Table 3: Empirical Test of Party Building Corollary

	County Level		District Level	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Core state</b>	0.009 (0.025)	0.000 (0.042)	0.007 (0.014)	-0.011 (0.020)
<b>Core state × unified government</b>	0.126** (0.053)		0.028 (0.045)	
<b>Core state × medium party standing</b>		0.030 (0.070)		0.040 (0.042)
<b>Core state × strong party standing</b>		0.133* (0.067)		0.053 (0.043)
Swing state	0.049** (0.019)	0.049** (0.020)	0.032 (0.022)	0.032 (0.022)
MC from president's party	0.010 (0.008)	0.010 (0.008)	0.030 (0.023)	0.029 (0.023)
MC from majority party	0.017* (0.009)	0.017* (0.010)	0.036 (0.038)	0.036 (0.038)
Committee chair	-0.031 (0.029)	-0.031 (0.029)	-0.098 (0.084)	-0.098 (0.084)
Appropriations / W&M	-0.020 (0.012)	-0.020 (0.012)	0.042* (0.023)	0.042* (0.023)
County population (logged)	0.256*** (0.095)	0.257*** (0.094)		
Poverty rate	0.004 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)		
Income per capita	-0.000 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)		
Fixed effect	County, Year	County, Year	District, Year	District, Year
<i>N</i>	76916	76916	10755	10755
Within <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.582	0.582	0.114	0.114

*Notes:*

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

Party Building Corollary. Therefore, the simple test of core state targeting conditional on divided or unified government does *not* support the party building corollary. In other words, massive co-partisan constituencies targeting is not the product of a weak party competitive environment but instead arise when presidents' party controls Congress.

Column (2) in Table 3 further demonstrates that the stronger party competitive standing the presidents face, the more federal grants are distributed toward counties in the president’s core states. Specifically, the coefficient of base level core state is not significantly from zero, whereas the coefficient of core state is 0.030 when interacted with medium party standing, and is 0.133 interacted with strong party standing, which is significant at the 90% confidence level. When the presidents are in a weak party competitive environment, however, they are unable to benefit their core, while as the party standing improves from weak to medium, and from medium to strong, core states acquire even more federal grants than do non-core states. Similar patterns of results are revealed in the district level analysis.

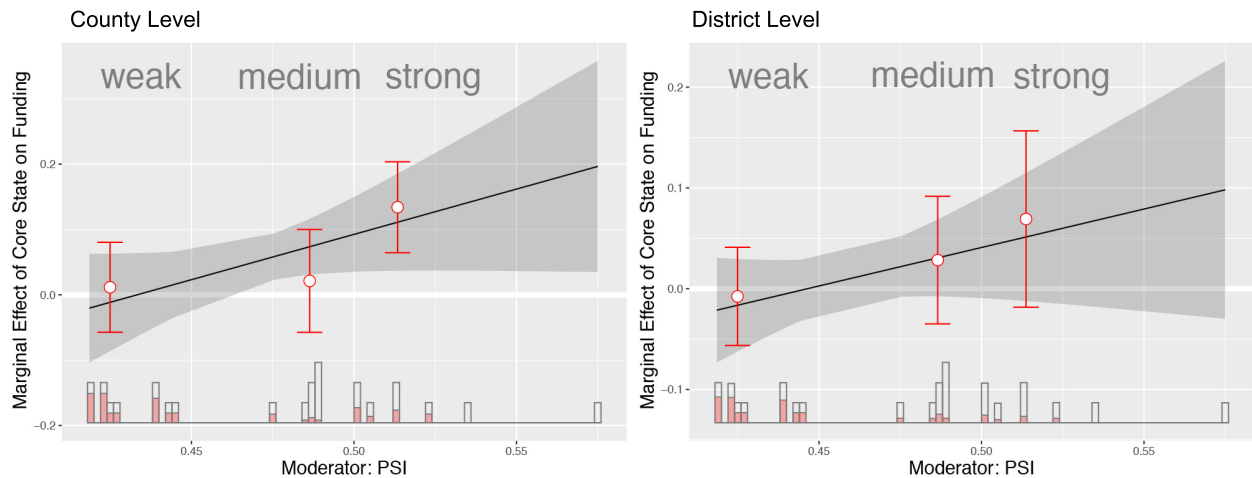


Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Core State on Federal Grants Allocation Conditional on Party Strength

*Notes:* At the bottom of each figure is displayed stacked histogram that shows the distribution of moderator. In the histogram, the total height of the stacked bars refers to the distribution of the moderator in the data and the red and grey shaded bars refer to the distribution of moderator in the core states and non-core states.

Figure 2 presents marginal plots of the instantaneous effects of core state on the federal funds allocation conditional on the party strength. We follow the method of marginal effects of binning estimators introduced by Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2017) and generate the marginal plots. This is a similar model specification as Model (3) but Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu’s method of generating marginal plots is a more general version. This method relaxes the linear interaction effect assumption and flexibly allows for heterogeneity in how the conditional marginal effect

changes across values of Party Standing Index. In addition, it offers protection against the potential problems of extrapolation or interpolation to areas where common support in the data is very sparse.<sup>7</sup> On the left-hand side of Figure 2, the county level dataset reveals a clearly growing effect of core state on federal grants distribution as the party strength becomes increasing. And in the strong party standing binning, significantly positive correlation between core states and more federal spending allocation appears. On the right-hand side, the district level dataset shows a moderate increasing, if there any, marginal effect of core state targeting conditional on party standing. The trends of core state effect conditional on party standing in both county level and district level reject the support the party building corollary.

### 4.3 The President’s Agenda

Rather than reflecting party building activities, the documented effects associated with core states may instead reflect the president’s policy priorities and general ideological orientation. Presidents from two parties, after all, 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 bridging the educational gap between rich and poor communities. Coincidentally, a great many poor people who reside in the socio-economically disadvantaged districts exhibit the most need for the federal funds and they have already been supporters for the Democratic party. On the other hand, Republican presidents believe that it is important to preserve natural lands so allocate funds through the Department of Interior. And the recipients of federal funding from the Department of Interior are mostly in rural places and they are likely to be Republican. Hence, policy and budgetary tilting to the core constituencies is not the particularistic aim but the consequential results of president’s ideology-driven policy priorities. In other words, presidents may achieve universalistic ends by particularistic means.

In the previous section, I find that massive core state targeting is associated with a president’s

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<sup>7</sup>For mathematical details, please see Jens Hainmueller, Jonathan Mummolo, and Yiqing Xu, “How Much Should We Trust Estimates from Multiplicative Interaction Models? Simple Tools to Improve Empirical Practice.” February 13, 2017. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2739221> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2739221>

strong party competitive standing. So when the presidents have already had a strong party, it is not unreasonable that presidents would advocate several federal assistance programs according to their long term goal and policy priority. Thus, the ideological interpretation naturally becomes the alternative explanation of the core state targeting.

Advancing this line of thinking further, we can evaluate the flow of federal funds through federal agencies. The core state effect in Kriner and Reeves' model can be caused *not* by the political bias of presidents, rather by the more mission-driven priorities of agencies (see, for example, Berry and Gersen 2017; Krause and Meier 2003; Krause and O'Connell 2017). The presidency scholars have acknowledged that presidents can effectively exercise control over agency behavior, through politicization and centralization (Lewis 2008; Lewis and Moe 2009); and meanwhile, presidents have *ex ante* and *ex post* influence on the federal fund appropriations (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). The administrative agencies make substantial efforts to ensure that the budget proposal reflects president's policy priorities; and a substantial portion of the federal grants are executed by federal agencies. Therefore, the agencies that are filled with partisan appointees who ideologically align with the presidents and also work more closely with the Executive Office of the Presidency would get more leverage in federal funding appropriation. For example, empirical evidence shows that in 2009, President Obama worked closely with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to allocate substantial proportion of federal money to create and advance their Race to the Top Initiative (Howell and Magazinnik 2017). Therefore, agencies do not weigh equally; and the effect of core state targeting can reasonably be a consequence of ideology-driven priorities of specific agencies.

In order to take into consideration the heterogeneity of federal funds allocated from different agencies, I rely on the original CFFR and FAADS dataset. The original datasets offer us an opportunity to filter the federal funds distribution by federal agency, because both datasets contain the detailed amount of money from each agency across counties or congressional districts over the years. So I benefit from the detailed agency code in both datasets and disaggregate the data into county-year-agency and district-year-agency panel datasets, which provide an opportunity to tease out the ideological distinction of presidents from different parties.

The strategy here is to run the same model specification in the agency-county-year or agency-

Table 4: Empirical Test of Ideological Approach

	<i>Dependent variable: Logged Federal Funds</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
<b>County Level (CFFR)</b>			
Core State	0.042** (0.018)	0.018 (0.028)	0.008 (0.047)
Swing state	0.046** (0.019)	-0.019 (0.021)	-0.011 (0.039)
Controls	X	X	X
Fixed Effect	County, Year	County, Agency, Year	County $\times$ Agency, Year
Observations	76,937	609,363	609,363
Number of unique county	3,082	3,082	
Number of unique county $\times$ agency			52,063
Within R <sup>2</sup>	0.602	0.455	0.056
<b>District Level (FAADS)</b>			
Core state	0.012 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.043)	-0.007 (0.069)
Swing state	0.032 (0.022)	-0.072* (0.036)	-0.052 (0.066)
Controls	X	X	X
Fixed Effect	District, Year	District, Agency, Year	District $\times$ Agency, Year
Observations	10,755	336,649	336,649
Number of unique district	1,433	1,588	
Number of unique district $\times$ agency			52,884
Within R <sup>2</sup>	0.116	0.630	0.020

*Notes:*

1. \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.
2. For the purpose of convenient comparison, Column (1) is the same as Column (2) and (3) in Table 1.
3. Since Core State is state-variant, robust Standard errors are clustered by state.

district-year panel datasets, and meanwhile fix federal agencies. By adding agency fixed effects into the previous model, which has already fixed county/district and year, we can control the different impact on federal funds allocation across federal agencies. Then, adding agency-by-county or agency-by-district fixed effects, I account for all time-invariant characteristics – observable and unobservable – of both agencies and counties/districts, and the interactions between agencies and counties/districts as well. In other words, fixing county and agency or fixing county by agency can partial out spending distributions that are caused by ideology-driven connection between the agency and the county/district. If the core state effects still hold in the agency-county-year or agency-district-year datasets, after fixing the agency, that indicates the partisan particularism of presidents. But if the core state effects are gone, it means that the ideology approach can better explain the core state targeting that we observe.

Table 4 presents the results. I find that after fixing the agency – either adding county, agency fixed effects or county by agency fixed effects, the core state effects are gone across the board. The core constituency targeting is not observed in both county level and district level data. Substantively, from Column (2) in Table 4, we know that being in a core state would not bring a county/district more funds from a specific agency. The core state effect, observed in previous sections, happens only across agencies but not within agencies. This indicates that the presidents’ ideological preference of federal agencies matters in the federal funding allocation. Furthermore, in the agency-state-year panel data, which can be aggregated from both CFFR and FAADS datasets, the core state effect also disappears. Generally speaking, the core state targeting dissipates after taking the ideological details into consideration. In other words, the core state effect on reaping disproportionate federal assistance funds that scholars observed may be interpreted by the ideological differences and the policy priority revealed by the agencies.

## 5 Conclusion

At the center of longstanding debates surrounding the American presidency are concerns about perspective and strategy. 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 raises a variety of concerns about the interpretations on offer. A rich body of formal theory on vote buying does not support the core voter logic and suggests, instead, that targeting and rewarding core constituencies should not be presidents' rational actions with the aim of gaining electoral advantage. When correcting the existing models and extending the available data, moreover, the main empirical finding itself attenuates in magnitude. When testing additional hypotheses that should hold if the party building interpretation were true, I find no evidence that is consistent with existing accounts of presidential particularism. Finally, I present additional evidence that suggests that core state targeting can be explained by presidential policy priorities and ideological commitments.

A great deal of uncertainty remains with respect to the debate between the president as a national leader or a particularistic advocate. This paper starts from this puzzle and contributes to the previous literature in several ways. First, I extend the electoral and party building line of argument and derive an empirically testable corollary from the original interpretation. I take a deep dive into the same county-level dataset on federal grants distribution used by Kriner and Reeves, and additionally analyze a district-level dataset on the federal discretionary fund data, to test robustness of the electoral and party building explanations. 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 opens up future research opportunities to further develop our theoretical comprehension of presidential behavior with better formal models. Third, building upon Galvin's (2010) concept of party competitive standing which relies on archival and anecdotal evidence, I have created a quantified measurement of party competitive environment. This enables us to explain the presidential partisan motivation in a more rigorous manner. And finally, by analyzing the original CFFR and FAADS data with detailed agency information, I offer some new evidence to how the federal funds are allocated and further cast doubt on the presidential particularistic claim.

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. The precise nature of the bargaining relationship between these actors, moreover, is often underspecified. And the

generalizability of these findings to other periods of American political history remains unknown. Just now, 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 even true, is not obviously 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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