The Politics of Appropriations Earmarks: Who Gets What and Why

Sandy Garcia & Keely Laurie
California State University, Channel Islands

Introduction

Earmarks. Few things in contemporary politics are as universally denounced and so miserably misunderstood. An appropriations bill allocates specific funds for an identifiable project or program in the state or district of a member of Congress. The U.S. Constitution invests Congress with the "power of the purse," the power to spend money[1]. Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly argue that earmarks are a means for individual representatives to get government spending to reflect the interests of their constituents.

Earmarks are requested by members of Congress, usually to benefit their district or state. Despite media misperceptions, a relatively small percentage of earmark requests are granted. In their study of military construction earmark requests, Frisch and Kelly demonstrate that 23.1% of earmark requests were approved.[2] Most political science research focuses on the role of political variables that determine which earmarks are included in Appropriations Committee reports. Using a unique data resource, we focus on the role of subcommittee staff in determining which earmarks are granted. We show that the professional staff of the committees heavily influence the distribution of earmarks. Earmark requests are vetted by professional staff before they are approved for inclusion, often including input from the executive bureaucracy. This suggests that earmarks undergo a process similar to what takes place in the executive bureaucracy. The objective of our study is to explore the question: who receives earmarks, and why? We examine the role of political variables; like electoral vulnerability, seniority, Appropriations Committee membership and leadership and the influence of staff. We conclude that subcommittee staff exercises substantial influence over the inclusion of earmarks in Appropriations bills. This suggests that Congress can be trusted to exercise its constitutional power of the purse while members serve the unique interests of their districts.

---

[1] United States Constitution, Article 1, Section 9, Clause 7

[2] Frisch, Scott & Kelly, Sean. Whose Pork is it Anyway? The Politics of Military Construction Earmarks in the Contemporary House of Representatives. Paper presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Background

Prior research has focused on political variables related to the distribution of earmarks. Reelection is a common priority for all politicians, and in order to gain support from their constituency, "representatives are likely to exert more effort to bring money into their districts when they are electorally vulnerable than when they are electorally secure".[3] Several studies find evidence that supports a relationship between earmarks and electorally vulnerable members of Congress.[4] FAADS data from the 101st Congress showed that the most vulnerable members received an average of 1.7 more awards per month than did the least vulnerable members. Vulnerable members receive awards based on the challenge they face, thus giving them a slight advantage regardless of how strong their contender may be.[5] Lazarus (2009, 1060) argues that this link "exists only among members of the majority party".

Seniority is also identified as an important factor. Seniority in Congress is the number of uninterrupted terms a member has completed, in their respective chambers. Lazarus argues, "members with high levels of seniority receive a disproportionate share of federal spending and/or projects in their districts".[6] Senior members of Congress have an advantage over junior members because they know how to negotiate the process. Experienced members of Congress become familiar with the development of appropriations and they utilize their expertise to further the welfare the people residing within their states.[7]

Other scholars cite Appropriations Committee leadership as an important influence: an individual's status as the Appropriations Committee Chair, ranking member, Appropriations subcommittee chair, or as a ranking member of a subcommittee.[8] Appropriations committee leaders have opportunity to exploit their status to direct funding toward their districts. Finally, Balla, *et al* state, "party leaders have positions of authority

[3] Levitt, Steven D., & Snyder, James M, Jr. The Impact of Federal Spending on House Election Outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy* 105 (1) 30-53.
[4] Ibid; Lazarus, Jeffrey. Party, Electoral Vulnerability, and Earmarks in the U.S House of Representatives. (2009). *The Journal of Politics*, 71:3.
[5] Frisch, Scott & Kelly, Sean. *Cheese Factories on the Moon: Why Earmarks Are Good for American Democracy*. (2011). 37. (See also Bickers & Stein, 1997).
[6] Lazarus, Jeffrey. Giving the People What They Want? The Distribution of Earmarks in the U.S. House of Representatives. (2010). *American Journal of Political Science*, 54: 2:339. (See also; Ferejohn 1974; Lee 2003).
[7] Fenno, Richard. The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress. (1966). (See also John R. Hibbing 1991; Dodd and Oppenheimer 2008; Stein and Bickers 1997).
[8] Lazarus, Jeffrey. Giving the People What They Want? The Distribution of Earmarks in the U.S. House of Representatives. (2010). *American Journal of Political Science*, 54:2.

within the chamber and party caucus that may enable them to extract resources for their constituents".[9] Lazarus finds that, "party leaders and members of the Appropriations Committee receive 20 and 21 earmarks more than the average member, respectively. Moreover, Appropriations Cardinals receive approximately 8.5 more earmarks than other Appropriations members, on average".[10]

An unexplored but significant element of the distribution of appropriations earmarks is the role of the subcommittee staff. In his classic study of the Appropriations Committee, Richard Fenno (1966) describes the professional nature of Appropriations staff: "The staff is not chosen and is not retained on the basis of party affiliation.... By not subjecting its staff to changes with each change in party control, the Committee ensures for itself that this expert knowledge will be preserved and increased".[11] Fenno suggests that the committee staff is insulated from the political hurly-burly of Congress and thus able to exercise their expertise in service to the committee. Recent research implies that, "the internal politics of the committee had begun to become more partisan in the early 1990s, and became dramatically more so during the 104th Congress".[12] While a possible shift in partisanship is important, what has not changed is the level of professionalism that subcommittee staff continues to have. Subcommittee staff handles most of the preliminary work on appropriations legislation and present it to sub-committee chairs for approval.[13]

Hypotheses and Data

We examined five hypotheses:

H1: Electorally vulnerable members are likely to request and receive more earmarks than electorally secure members.

H2: The more senior a member of Congress is, the more earmarks they will request and receive.

H3: Appropriations Committee leaders will request and receive more earmarks.

H4: Appropriations Committee members will request and receive more earmarks.

---

[9] Balla, Steven, et al. Partisanship, Blame Avoidance, and the Distribution of Legislative Pork. (2002). *American Journal of Political Science*, 46:3.
[10] Lazarus, Jeffrey. Giving the People What They Want? The Distribution of Earmarks in the U.S. House of Representatives. (2010). *American Journal of Political Science*, 54:2:344.
[11] Fenno, Richard. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress.* (1966) 184.
[12] Handy, Sarah & Strahan, Randall. Staff Politics in the Republican House: The Case of the Appropriations Committee. (2004). *Congress & the Presidency*, 31:1:6.
[13] Ibid. See also Joseph White, "The Functions and Power of the House Appropriations Committee." PhD Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley; Frisch and Kelly *Cheese Factories.*

H5: Projects recommended by the subcommittee staff are more likely to be included in the House bill.

To test these conjectures, we used earmark request data acquired by Professors Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly from the archived papers of a former member of Congress. Earmark requests are submitted to the appropriate subcommittee of the Appropriations committee, in this case the House Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services (Labor-H). These requests are entered into a spreadsheet by subcommittee staff. These data are for House Republicans during the 2008 appropriations cycle. Prior to 2009, these requests were not made public; these data thus give us unique insight into the pre-reform behavior of members and the subcommittee. Combined with data about earmarks that were included in the Appropriations bill, which is publically available, we are able to determine which members of Congress made submissions and whose requests were successful. Our data also include the staff recommendations on each earmark, which allows us to gauge the impact of staff on the distribution of earmarks.

Findings

Table 1 presents the average number of earmark *requests* associated with different requestor characteristics. Electorally vulnerable members of Congress on average request one more earmark than electorally safe members, and more senior members request 3.10 more earmarks on average than junior members. Committee position matters more than electoral vulnerability or seniority. Appropriations Committee members requested approximately 5.04 more earmarks than non-members, members of the Labor-H Subcommittee 5.41 more requests, and Appropriations Committee leaders made 7.61 more earmark requests than those not in a committee leadership position. Those who made fewer requests include members of the Education and Labor Committee—the committee that authorizes Labor-H programs—and party leaders. These results suggest that members of the Appropriations Committee are more solicitous of earmarks than other members of Congress.

Our research suggests that Appropriations Committee staffers have an important role in determining who *gets earmarks*. Table 2 indicates that earmarks recommended by staff are more likely to pass into law than those not recommended by staff. During the fiscal year 2008 Republicans requested 1193 earmarks be included

in the House bill. Of these earmarks, subcommittee staff recommended 517 be included in the bill and 676 be left out of the bill. Of the 517 recommended earmarks 419 (86.9%) of them were included in the bill; only 63 (13.1) of those not recommended for inclusion wound up in the bill. These results indicate the level of influence that subcommittee staff has on which bills are included in Appropriations actions. Rather than the Appropriation Committee simply acting as a "favor factory," the staff carefully vets requests and is committed to making considered decisions regarding earmarks.

Table 3 presents results of a binomial regression model aimed at testing our five hypotheses about who *gets* earmarks. We develop two models. Model 1 examines hypotheses 1 through 4 attempting to predict the inclusion of an earmark using only political variables; Model 2 includes data on staff recommendations. Model 1 suggests that several of the political variables are good predictors: Appropriations Committee membership, party leaders, and electorally vulnerable members are all more likely to have their earmarks included, though committee leaders are less likely to have their earmarks included. Model 1 correctly predicts about 63% of the included earmarks. Model 2 retains the political variables and includes a variable for whether the earmark was recommended by staff. The results suggest that a staff recommendation is the best predictor of whether an earmark will be included. Three political variables remain significant. Members of the subcommittee are more likely to have their earmarks included as are more senior members of the House, and electorally vulnerable members. This model performs remarkably well correctly predicting 86.6% of the included earmarks.

Conclusion

Previous research focused on political variables that influence the distribution of earmarks. Our findings support the hypothesis that staff recommendations are an important factor in the process of distribution congressional appropriations earmarks. Their influence over earmarks suggests that earmarks receive more scrutiny than the conventional wisdom suggests, and that earmarks are distributed to support both the political interests of members of Congress, and local policy goals in their districts. Our findings suggest that Congress does this under the watchful eye of the professional staff of the committee.

Appendix A:

Table 1: Who Asks for What? Mean Republican Labor-H Earmark Requests (requesting members) FY 2008

	Mean Number of Requests	Mean Difference	*p*
Electoral Vulnerability[+]			
Marginal	9.48	+ 0.98	*p*=.003
Safe	8.50		
Seniority[@]			
Not Senior	6.02	+3.10	*p*=.003
Senior	9.12		
Appropriations Committee			
Member	12.53	+ 5.04	*p*=.000
Non-Member	7.49		
Labor-H Subcommittee			
Member	13.86	+ 5.47	*p*=.000
Non-Member	8.39		
Appropriations Committee Leader[~]			
Ranking Member	15.35	+ 7.61	*p*=.000
Non-Ranking Member	7.74		
Education & Labor Committee			
Member	7.02	- 1.86	*p*=.000
Non-Member	8.88		
Party Leader[#]			
Leader	8.33	- 0.36	*p*=.762
Non-Leader	8.70		
Extended Party Leader[^]			
Leader	6.93	- 1.80	*p*=.034
Non-Leader	8.74		
Average number of requests = 8.69		*Total Number of Requests=1193*	

[+] Marginal members are those who either 1) won by less than 10% in a district that was carried by George Bush in the 2004 presidential election or 2) won by less than 10% in a district that was carried by John Kerry in the 2004 election.
[@] Senior members are those who have served more than two terms in the House.
[~] Ranking Minority Member or RMM on one of the subcommittees
[#] Republican Leader, Whip, and Conference Secretary.
[^] Republican Leader, Whip, Conference Secretary, Conference Vice Chair, Conference Secretary, Chief Deputy Whip, and Chair National Republican Campaign Committee.

Table 2: Who Gets What? Staff Recommendations and Earmarks in the House Bill, Republicans FY 2008

		Staff Recommendation		
		Not Recommended	Recommended	Total
Earmark Status in House Bill	Earmark not included	613 86.2%	98 13.8%	711 100.0%
	Earmark included	63 13.1%	419 86.9%	482 100.0%
	Total	676 56.7%	517 43.3%	1193 100.0%

Measures of association: $X^2 = 625.89$ ($p \leq .000$) $r = .72$ ($p \leq .000$) Lambda = .953 ($p \leq .000$)

Table 3: Predictors of Earmarks Included in the House Bill, Binary Logistic Regression, Republicans FY 2008

	Dependent Variable: Earmark Included in House Bill (1=Yes)			
	Model One		Model Two	
	β (s.e)	β^{exp}	β (s.e)	β^{exp}
Appropriations Committee Member (1=Yes)	1.57*** (.23)	4.82	.20 (.29)	--
Labor-H Subcommittee Member (1=Yes)	-.04 (.30)	--	1.17*** (.41)	3.21
Appropriations Committee Cardinal (1=Yes)	-1.17*** (.27)	.31	.20 (.29)	--
Education & Labor Committee Member (1=Yes)	.11 (.20)	--	-.37 (.31)	--
Extended Party Leadership (1=Yes)	1.08** (.44)	2.94	-.37 (.48)	--
Marginal Member (1=Yes)	.52*** (.15)	1.68	.51** (.23)	1.66
Seniority (years in office)	-.01 (.01)	--	.03** (.01)	1.03
First Priority Earmark (1=Yes)	--	--	.95*** (.26)	2.60
Staff Recommendation (1=Recommended)	--	--	3.62*** (.20)	37.46
Constant	-.63*** (.08)		-2.94*** (.23)	
Percent Correctly Predicted	63.0%		86.6%	
Number of Cases	1193		1193	
Pseudo R^2	.09		.63	

Note: See table 1 for the definition of most variables. Figures in parentheses are standard errors.
*** $p \leq .01$ ** $p \leq .05$ * $p \leq .10$