

The Public Buildings Boom: Distributive and Partisan Politics in the Modernizing Congress

Charles J. Finocchiaro*

Department of Political Science
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208
finocchi@mailbox.sc.edu

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Abstract

Studies of distributive politics in the modern Congress have wrestled with the interplay between political parties, presidential and executive branch influence, and committee power in allocating federal funds to states and congressional districts. It is widely accepted that most legislators anticipate an electoral benefit for successfully steering pork to their constituents, but the literature has produced inconsistent evidence demonstrating an electoral advantage for pork and has found largely conditional effects for the role of congressional parties and the executive branch. This paper advances our understanding of distributive and partisan politics, as well as congressional development more generally, by looking to an earlier era of congressional history. Using original data on the construction of public buildings I describe the unfolding of a precursor to modern-style pork-barrel politics. Moreover, analysis of the factors determining how party and committee leaders distributed federal benefits among the increasingly-careerist legislators of the time reveals the nature of partisan and electoral considerations in even the pre-modern Congress.

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1 Introduction

A penchant for particularism characterizes legislative politics in the United States and beyond. Legislators recognize the potential electoral benefits of steering government resources to the localities they represent and engaging in constituency service on behalf of voters. In fact, the same legislators often set up institutions that afford them the opportunity to traffic in these sorts of activities which, as a group, are typically less controversial than other official actions such as roll call voting that may put them at odds with some segments of the electorate. Studies of the U.S. Congress in the modern, post-World War II era demonstrate that advertising and credit-claiming activities are nearly universal and comprise a significant component of legislators' efforts to build a personal vote that can insulate incumbents from partisan tides (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). Today's independent member of Congress (MC), tied less closely to the national and local party than predecessors from an earlier era, operates as more of a free agent. The post-war effort to structure legislative institutions to facilitate the electoral goals of MCs, highlighted by Mayhew (1974) and others, is in fact so compelling, and the tendency of careerism so prevalent, that the public's view of the Congress takes for granted the fact that most of its members look to make a home in national politics.

Research on personal vote building and the electoral connection has tended to downplay the role of political parties, in part because the era in which these theories were initially conceived was characterized by weaker parties in Congress. Indeed, recent work on distributive politics in particular has often found a striking lack of congressional influence on federal outlays across broad categories of spending. Yet there is good reason to expect parties, as well as those members in key positions of institutional influence, to attempt to extract greater gains from the resources at hand. Thus a great deal of research has examined the extent to which the majority party, in particular, stands to benefit from distributive politics. One strand of research finds mixed evidence for party influence in distributive politics. More recently, an emerging paradigm motivated by the identification challenges inherent in observational data has offered more conditional findings. In nearly all of these cases, however, the focus has been on particular types of pork within a relatively short span of congressional history.

This paper expands the playing field for examining the mechanics of distributive politics in

Congress by bringing to bear new data that affords a unique perspective on the interplay between parties and what many consider to be a predominantly universalistic realm of legislative politics. By looking at an era that witnessed high levels of party polarization alongside increasingly independent, career-oriented MCs in search of new tools for personal vote building, the results of this study cast new light on one of the primary responsibilities of the legislative branch, exercising the power of the purse, as well as a fundamental question of political science—how are allocative decisions made? The results suggest that Congress, when taking up new responsibilities and identifying opportunities to cultivate constituency loyalty, is likely to do so voraciously and with an eye to building partisan majorities.

2 Distributive and Partisan Politics in Congress

The nature and organization of modern legislative politics, and congressional careers more broadly, has received considerable scholarly attention. Yet, with some notable exceptions, the underlying causes of institutional development and the historical roots of the modern Congress have seen comparatively less analysis. Moreover, modern theories of congressional politics developed in a somewhat disjointed fashion. For instance, theories constructed to explain the electorally-motivated Congress, often focusing on the distributive tendency of members, were conceived in the post-World War II era of weak parties, and largely predate accounts that posit a significant role for political parties in organizing Congress and managing its agenda, theories arising from the resurgence of polarization in the late 20th century. In recent years, a great deal of exchange between these theoretical perspectives has occurred, producing a more thorough understanding of the conditions under which parties are most likely to have an impact on policymaking and elucidating the mechanisms of distributive politics and the contexts in which the pork barrel characterization of Congress is most applicable.

Research on distributive politics has a rich and colorful history in legislative studies. Some of the earliest and most prominent theories of congressional organization take logrolling to be an essential part of what enables Congress to function (Ferejohn 1978; Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Weingast and Marshall 1988). Evans (2004) describes the importance of distributive politics to the majority party's ability to advance legislation, while Stein and Bickers (1995) argue that members facing electoral challenges are advantaged in funding decisions, since

voters reward incumbents for projects delivered to the district.

While much of the early literature on distributive politics gave little attention to the influence of congressional parties, a string of research arose to challenge this “party-less” conception of legislative organization. This literature posits a role for parties not only on the most salient legislation integral to its agenda and brand name (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 2005), but in other respects as well. While the pork barrel is not central to partisan theories, it can and at times does play a role. Indeed, a number of studies have argued that distributive politics helps the majority party in building and holding together coalitions, can be used to produce side-payments for maintenance of the party cartel, and/or aligns with issues on which parties may polarize (Hurwitz, Moiles, and Rohde 2001; Carroll and Kim 2010). Other researchers have identified a partisan tenor to the distribution of federal funds (Levitt and Snyder 1995; Balla et al. 2002). On the whole, though, the evidence of party effects on distributive politics and the resulting electoral payoff to incumbents are largely conditional, holding only for certain types of spending in particular contexts—a finding that extends even to the more directly-manipulable (by Congress) realm of earmarks (Sellers 1997; Lazarus 2009; Clemens, Crespin, and Finocchiaro 2015, N.D.).

More recently, scholars have taken up the question of the degree to which Congress is central in determining distributive outlays. Motivated in part by developments in research design strategy, and attempting to remedy difficult confounding relationships, the logic of spending decisions on broad federal outlays appears to be heavily influenced by presidential party interests (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010; Dynes and Huber 2015; Kriner and Reeves 2015). This work is consistent with other perspectives that advocate a greater role for the executive branch in theories of distributive politics (Bertelli and Grose 2009; Hudak 2014).

A common feature of nearly all the existing literature is its predominant focus on the modern Congress. What I set out to do in the remainder of this paper is examine distributive politics in a realm of policy making that is both more subject to congressional influence and that played out in an era of congressional, rather than executive, dominance. The next section describes that context in greater detail.

3 Particularism in the Modernizing Congress

Among the most sacred of all congressional institutions is the pork barrel. From the earliest days of the Republic, redistributive politics have engendered a great deal of controversy, on issues ranging from “internal improvements” to sectional conflict on the tariff and pensions (Balogh 2009; Bensel 1984, 62–73). By the late 19th century, the pork barrel was an often mentioned and frequently criticized dimension of congressional politics. Despite numerous attempts to curtail the distributive tendencies of the post-Civil War House, the pull of the pork barrel was often quite significant (Stewart 1989). Wilson (1986) remains the most prominent study of distributive politics in the pre-modern Congress. He examines the allocation of funds for river and harbor improvements from 1889 to 1913 and finds no evidence of partisan manipulation. Rather, funding seems to have followed a universalistic rationale. In this section, I describe the temporal trends in activity and practice with respect to public buildings legislation and link the characteristics of the legislation to scholarly descriptions of distributive politics.

Congress’ dealings in local, particularized politics ramped up in important ways around the turn of the 20th century. The trends are evident in the legislative record itself, which saw increasing bill introductions in both the House and Senate on a variety of project legislation—everything from bridge construction to river and harbor improvements to road construction. Perhaps no better example can be cited, however, than the construction of public buildings. Setting aside military installations, the Treasury Department managed slightly more than 300 federal buildings in 1890. That figure grew to about 425 in 1900, and by 1910 the number had swelled to nearly 1,200 buildings completed, underway, or authorized by act of Congress. With passage of the last omnibus public buildings act of the 1910s, about 1,450 buildings had been authorized—a nearly five-fold increase in just 25 years.

The data used in this study comprise all federal buildings under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Department, via the Office of the Supervising Architect, exclusive of marine hospitals and quarantine stations. This list excludes, then, military bases and installations, as well as other federal property located outside the continental U.S. such as embassies and State Department posts. Additionally, I omit federal buildings in Washington, D.C., since the district lacks representation in Congress and has a special claim to government buildings. This leaves the large number of mostly

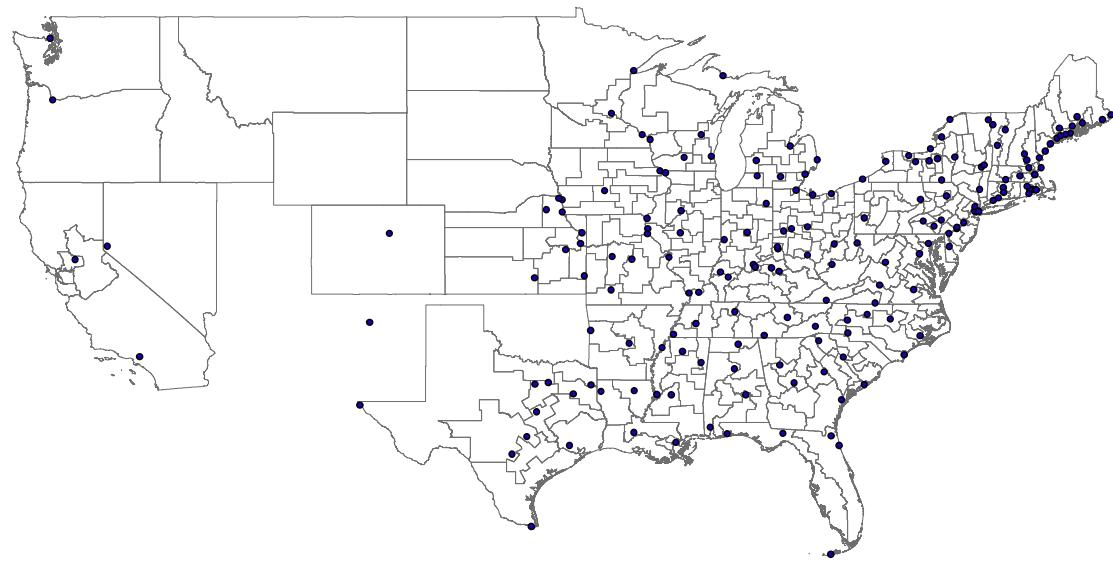
post offices, court houses, and custom houses dispersed throughout the nation.¹ The data through mid-1900 were coded based on a government report (U.S. Department of the Treasury 1901). All successive public buildings authorized and constructed were identified by culling the legislative record from the 53rd to 66th Congress. Every bill proposing a public building was identified, its legislative history traced, and all bills reported by the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds were captured. For each bill, the city, federal service, amount of funding authorized, and the nature of the authorization (site purchase only, site and construction, expansion, etc.) were coded.²

Using GIS software, I then linked each named location to a congressional district based on the boundary files of Lewis et al. (2013). As I describe in more detail later, this also required linking districts across state redistricting plans in order to construct an appropriate panel data set of projects within districts. Figure 1 presents the diffusion of public building projects in the 20 years spanning the turn of the 20th century. Many of these facilities were post offices, and congressional debates often refer to them as politically-motivated “pork.” As such, the process hearkens to our contemporary understanding of distributive politics.

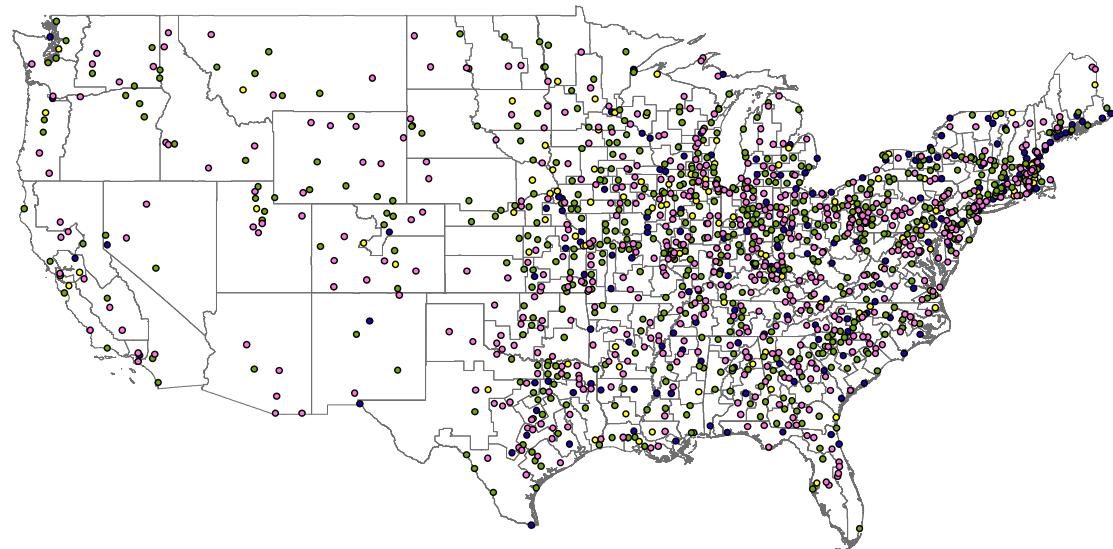
I turn next to a description of the contours of congressional (primarily House) action on public building legislation during this era. Legislative practice evolved from acting on proposed projects in a piecemeal fashion to transacting a great deal of business in the form of omnibus bills. Beginning in the 1890s, both the House and, to a lesser degree, the Senate witnessed increasing sponsorship of legislation proposing a public building for particular locales. Figure 2 plots the number of bills that were referred to the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, the jurisdictional home for public building projects, from the 52nd (1891-1893) to the 65th (1917-1919) Congress. By 1912, demand for public buildings, as indicated by members’ introduction of bills to authorize construction and increase the limit of cost for projects previously awarded, increased dramatically. In fact, when the committee reported omnibus legislation providing for public buildings, it usually

¹For the sake of comparability, I omit a small number of distinct, infrequently observed public buildings, including appraisers’ stores, memorials, subtreasuries, immigrant stations, and a building for the Bureau of Mines in Pittsburgh. The Treasury Department excluded from its roster of buildings marine hospitals and quarantine stations.

²I was able to validate the list of individual sites/buildings using a subsequent government document providing an inventory of the status of each public building and site, as well as the congressional district in which it was located, as of Oct. 1, 1913, covering all projects inclusive of the Mar. 4, 1913 omnibus public buildings legislation (U.S. Senate 1913. *Public Buildings and Sites*. S. Doc. 244).



(a) 1890



(b) 1913

Figure 1: Federal Buildings under the Supervision of the Treasury Department
This figure shows the expansion of federal buildings throughout the U.S. from 1890 through 1913. Extant buildings in 1890 are represented by blue markers in both panels, with buildings authorized by 1900 in yellow, 1910 in green, and 1913 in pink). Boundaries are congressional districts.

prefaced the report with some language about how difficult it was to meet the demands of the chamber, as the following excerpt from 1908 illustrates:

“Your committee has had under consideration not less than 821 bills, including 56 sent over from the other House. The total appropriations called for in these bills reach the enormous sum of \$112,371,000, while the total authorization recommended by the committee in this bill is not quite one-fifth of that amount, namely, \$20,963,000” (H. Rept. 1660, 60th Congress).

In the next two congresses, the number of bills did not change drastically, but the amount requested swelled to \$225,000,000 and \$300,000,000, respectively (H. Rept. 1648, 61st Congress; H. Rept. 1522, 62nd Congress).

For the subset of bills that were taken up by the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds and favorably reported, members of Congress were accustomed to the opportunity to debate and scrutinize each bill individually. A common theme in committee reports and floor debate was the growth of public business and the inability of existing spaces to accommodate the burgeoning public service. Accounts frequently highlighted the savings to the federal government of constructing a permanent building rather than renting space, a claim typically based on population and the amount of federal revenue received from the local federal office(s). For instance, in justifying an addition to the federal building in Dubuque, Mr. Henderson (R-IA) noted that when the building was begun in the 1850s, the population was just over 3,100, yet had grown to about 46,000 by 1899. By the turn of the century, it housed an array of federal services, from the post office to the circuit and district courts to the internal revenue service, with other agencies like the weather bureau paying rent for space in the community. Over cries of “Vote! Vote!” Henderson said, to laughter in the House chamber, “That is the way, gentlemen, to do business when you have a righteous cause” (*Congressional Record*, 2/7/1899, pg. 1576). And the House proceeded efficiently to the next bill for a public building at Omaha, Nebraska.

In the second session of the 56th Congress (March of 1901) the House took up a bill to increase the limit of cost for forty public buildings that had been authorized previously. This appears to be the first instance in which the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds aggregated projects into a single legislative vehicle, using an omnibus bill drafted by the committee. Rep. Bailey (D-TX) managed the time in opposition to the bill. Coming to realize his place in a faction that was

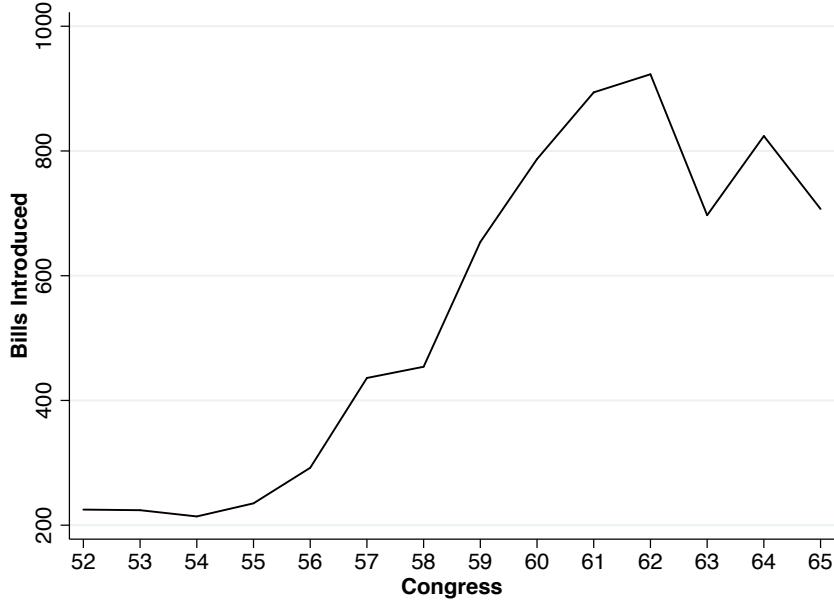


Figure 2: House Bills Referred to the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, 1891-1919

exceedingly small, he said that had he “known in the beginning how widely and how judiciously the pork in this barrel had been distributed I would have had no expectation of defeating it” (*Congressional Record*, 3/2/1901, pg. 3448). Mr. Sulzer (D-NY) also rose in opposition, largely due to the committee’s refusal to provide a post office to New York, in the process arguing that the bill would likely pass without so much as a division vote under suspension of the rules, and that the measure was “another demonstration of the cohesive power of the public plunder.” Sulzer also pointed out that even Joseph Cannon (R-IL), soon to be Speaker but at that time still Chairman of the Committee on Appropriations, neglected to deliver his typical “eloquent and emphatic protest against this bill, which will take hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars out of the public Treasury” despite the fact that in the closing days of the session Cannon had repeatedly protested “these kind of reckless and extravagant appropriations. But when this omnibus building bill comes up...we do not hear a word from the gentleman from Illinois...It only goes to show, however, how strong and powerful local patronage is to secure legislation” (3448). When the bill reached the Senate, the “dangers” of such legislation were again highlighted, with Senator Platt (R-CT) noting that “there is no use in opposing this bill. It is like these other bills that come here—omnibus bills. There is so much in them for different States that the whole goes, when, if they were brought

here on separate bills they would be carefully considered and very likely rejected” (*Congressional Record*, 3/2/1901, pg. 3410).

From that point forward, perhaps motivated by this first foray into omnibus legislating, the House never looked back. All future authorizations took the form of omnibus bills through the 1910s. While the committee issued a number of reports on individual bills proposed by members in the 57th House, when it came time to bring a bill to the floor, it did so by drafting a fresh piece of legislation aggregating more than 180 separate projects. The bill authorized increased limits to the cost of buildings already underway, construction of buildings on sites already owned by the federal government, purchase of sites for future construction as yet unauthorized, and the purchase of sites and erection of buildings thereon. These bills typically included a range of authorizations, with some states and localities gaining more favorable (and accelerated) action than others. Indeed, this is one of the underlying tensions revealed in the bills. Despite the fact that the interests of members of both parties and of districts throughout the country were attended to, some stood to gain much more than others. As the debates reveal, one can see the fingerprints of a classic logroll, as many members were likely hesitant to oppose a bill that provided any benefit for their district, even if it was just a \$5,000 or \$10,000 authorization for enlargement of a public building in their district, while other members secured a new building valued in many cases at \$100,000 or more.

Interestingly, the 1902 bill was brought to the floor under a closed rule, a rare move for not just public buildings measures but for distributive legislation of any kind in this era. As Roberts (2010) describes, while special rules saw increased utilization in this period, they were usually employed for bills coming from the “control” committees dealing with issues of particular interest to the majority party. Vociferous objections were lodged both against the manner in which the bill was called up for consideration, as well as the nature of the legislation itself. Mr. Cramer, a one-term Democrat from New York, raised a point of order on the rule on the grounds that it did more than simply fix the order of business. Speaker Henderson, less than six months away from making his surprise announcement that he would forgo another term, ruled that “the question has been fought out again and again, and is well settled,” a decision which Creamer appealed to the House but was quickly rebuffed by a tabling motion adopted by voice vote (*Congressional Record* 4/29/1902, pg. 4820). While Creamer posited (to laughter in the chamber) that his defeat could be attributed to the fact that “most of the gentlemen upon this side, as well as on the other side of the House,

would seem to have pork in the barrel,” Mr. Richardson of Tennessee voiced concern reflective of that from the previous year regarding a “method of legislation” that would overturn more than a century of congressional practice of considering public building bills separately. “It is a very modern, a very recent idea that we can not consider public-building bills upon their merits, and that each bill to construct a public building can not be allowed to stand up on its own merits, if it has any” (pg. 4820).

The committee dutifully reported that all bills referred to it were “considered with care and impartiality and without regard to section, party, or individual” and that “the investigation of the merits of these hundreds of varying propositions” occupied the committee for many months (H. Rept. 1648, 61st Congress). Yet there were whispers of favoritism, and in certain cases, explicit charges to that effect. Certainly the omnibus nature of such bills, as the critics claimed, provided some cover for politically-motivated allocations. One such example was entered into the record by Rep. Feely, a first-term Democrat from Oak Park, Illinois. Feely charged that despite overwhelming support in his district, within the Illinois congressional delegation (with one exception), and even on the part of his predecessor, William Lorimer, the incumbent Republican who he defeated, a post office for Oak Park was omitted from the bill for political reasons. In fact, Feely produced a letter purportedly written by fellow Illinoian James R. Mann, a leading Chicago Republican and future House minority leader, to a resident of Oak Park, in which Mann responded to a request for “aid in securing a Government building at Oak Park.” In Mann’s “judgement the only chance Oak Park had to secure a public building was through the reelection of Mr. Lorimer to Congress. If I remember correctly, the Oak Park people were not very enthusiastic in his support. Oak Park is in the district represented by Mr. Feely, as far as the present Congress is concerned, and will probably have to wait so long as it is represented by a new member of Congress” (pg. 4824).

More often, though, criticism of public buildings legislation focused on the furtive nature by which the bills were assembled. While members would often propose bills early in the first session of a congress, with the committee holding months of hearings thereafter, nonetheless in many cases the bill would be rushed to the floor in the closing days of a session with little opportunity for members to scrutinize its contents. As Mr. Fitzgerald (D-NY) noted in the 1908 debate, “the papers of the country have announced that the public-buildings bill was being held up until after a currency bill had been passed through this House, and that as soon as that bill was passed with

the necessary votes this bill would be reported.” Noting that this “peculiar coincidence” was no mere speculation, he went on to point out that:

“This bill contains sixty-two pages. It has been in print about three hours. The gentleman from Missouri [Mr. Bartholdt, chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds] asks the House to examine this bill carefully, not of course before it passes, but after it passes, and then to do the committee the justice to say that every section of the country has been fairly and impartially treated, or, as I might more bluntly state it, that the spoils have been evenly distributed to accomplish the purpose desired. It has been asserted that this bill would be so prepared that if the President of the United States dared to exercise his constitutional power and to veto this bill, so many Members would be personally interested in it that there would be no question that the bill would pass easily, over the veto of the President. Of course, Mr. Speaker, ... I am quite confident the present Chief Executive of the United States will never put the Congress to the test by vetoing a public-building bill.” (*Congressional Record* 5/15/1908, pg. 6349).

To what degree these types of charges—whether they be of the partisan or, in contrast, universalistic nature of the legislation—are more than anecdotal requires systematic analysis of the sort that follows. Before doing so, I turn next to a different aspect of the timing of the legislation, in this case as it relates to the electoral rather than the legislative calendar.

The rhythm of legislating on public buildings during this period bears mentioning because if such projects carried electoral benefits for the members who were able to secure them, then we should expect to see a pattern of behavior that reflects the electoral calendar and the nature of electioneering described by Tufte (1978) and others. In his review, Franzese (2002) summarizes Tufte’s model as one that anticipates the production of palpable and attributable benefits that are subject to easy manipulation, targeting, and timing by elected politicians (379-380). Public buildings legislation seems to fit the description. Members found repeated credit-claiming opportunities since funding often occurred in stages once the initial authorization was made, with subsequent increases to the limit of cost and yearly appropriations all providing something to publicize. And this says nothing about the likelihood of subsequent expansion of buildings once completed.

Another characteristic of particularistic legislation that seems to apply to the public buildings program of this period is the nature of the distribution itself. As Lowi (1964) describes, what differentiates distributive benefits from programmatic policies is that the system of allocation does not follow a general rule. Rather, the policies may be “morselized” by politicians interested in targeting beneficiaries according to political or geographic goals rather than economic or programmatic ones

(Cox and McCubbins 2001). Indeed, a great deal of debate on the floor of the House, at least prior to the gag that began to accompany omnibus bills in the House, involved challenges of particular projects on the grounds that they did not meet broader aims for the public building program, to the degree that such a basis existed. On that point, it is worth noting that scholarly treatments of federal buildings in this era, from perspectives as varied as architecture and history, cite the political nature of decisions in this realm of federal policy (Craig 1984; Lee 2000).³

4 Theory and Hypotheses

It seems reasonably safe to assume that politics played a role in the expansion of public buildings in the U.S. in the early 20th century. How do the interests of parties in Congress interact with the institution's broader development of legislative perquisites and the House's competing power centers, particularly a committee system increasingly populated by careerists? Numerous studies demonstrate the compelling effects of parties in Congress, while others question the independent influence of parties on member behavior. In this section, I briefly sketch a theoretical account describing why we might expect the House majority party to exert an influence on distributive politics during this period of congressional history, and posit some empirical expectations following from it.

By the late 19th century, the House of Representatives had become an unwieldy body. Dilatory tactics had become such a burden on governance that the chamber majority instituted the Reed Rules to more proactively steer the flow of legislation. Most accounts highlight the partisan nature of House politics at the turn of the century, and the ability of the majority party to advance its agenda by virtue of special rules and control of the key levers of power in the chamber. Yet the era also witnessed an increased role for seniority and institutionalization (Polsby 1968). While these need not be contradictory trends (smooth passage of legislation could facilitate members' reelection interests on nonpartisan legislation), it is not much of a stretch to expect parties to use distributive politics for their advantage when possible. As described earlier, there is some evidence of this in the contemporary Congress, and distributive issues can at times overlay partisan interests (Hurwitz,

³Senate debates, unconstrained by the restrictive procedures of the House, reveal many more criticisms of inconsistent criteria. One future direction for this project is to incorporate the Senate into the analysis and to address the results of conference committee deliberations as well. A particularly interesting avenue to pursue is Lee's (2004) finding that House members and senators face differing incentive structures when it comes to redistributive funding mechanisms.

Moiles, and Rohde 2001).

Moreover, we know that Congress became a place members wanted to stay (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999; Kernell 2003), and that tenure was increasing through much of the period. There are a number of arguments for how increasing careerism likely impacted the internal processes of Congress. For instance, (Katz and Sala 1996) argue that a desire to cultivate the personal vote, spurred by introduction of the secret ballot, led House members to solidify property rights over committee seats. And Stewart (1989) describes the influence of electoral and partisan politics on the appropriations process, and various reforms to it, throughout the period examined here. One important question, however, is whether we should expect electoral considerations to operate in a fashion comparable to that of the modern Congress?

Recent research has pushed forward the frontiers of what we know about the electoral connection historically—the role of legislative position taking, the strategic nature of candidate decisions, etc. (see Carson and Jenkins (2011) for a thorough review)—yet we know comparatively less about the interplay between electoral and broader system changes and their impact upon internal legislative politics. That is to say, while some scholarship has shown that electoral reforms such as the Australian ballot impacted congressional institutions like the committee system (Katz and Sala 1996) and increased the incumbency advantage (Roberts 2009), we know much less about how these changes affected legislators' behavior in Congress (but see Wittrock et al. (2008)). Looking to history, and an era in which representation, legislating, partisan politics, state-building, and bureaucratic politics evolved significantly, affords us the opportunity to directly assess the building blocks that undergird theories of institutional politics.

This era was one of strong partisanship, at least by most accounts. It witnessed the strongest speakers in House history, the introduction of Reed's Rules, high levels of party voting, and so forth (Brady 1973; Cox and McCubbins 2005). However, some have questioned the degree to which this conception of the era is accurate, noting that Speaker Cannon may not have been as heavy-handed as popular accounts at the time, and the literature motivated by them, would suggest (Krehbiel and Wiseman 2001, 2005; Lawrence, Maltzman, and Wahlbeck 2001).

I argue, consistent with a partisan rationale for legislative organization, that the majority party will take a special interest in co-opting a disproportionate share of potential electoral benefits that can be channeled through the House. The reasons for this are rather obvious. In the interest of

maintaining majority status, particularly in an era in which voters had the opportunity to cast a more personal vote away from the eyes of party workers (unlike in the pre-secret ballot era), distributing government largesse could be an important tool for the majority in insulating itself from the vicissitudes of elections. While the party program was likely the major motivation for House organization and at the heart of what party leaders sought to accomplish, there is little reason to expect them not to take an interest in other areas of legislation as well. The attractiveness of pork is significant, not only in attempting to build coalitions but more broadly in using the “spoils” of office to maintain power.

Thus, I expect that if congressional parties were consequential at this time, then they would have reason to extract greater benefits from public building legislation. These decisions were not made in a vacuum, of course, and the majority party was also likely concerned about insulating itself from charges of corruption or overt partisanship. Moreover, the leadership probably valued the efficient passage of legislation. In that sense, there would be little advantage to cutting the minority out of the deal altogether, particularly since many members of the opposing party came from districts in which the majority party was not competitive and concentrating benefits in those districts would carry little cost for the majority. In this way, the sort of political “cover” described by Balla et al. (2002) seems to have been apparent in public building legislation. Thus, it would be consistent with expectations to find, as members claimed, that many (even most) districts gained something from such legislation. But the primary question is whether the majority party took more, and whether it did so systematically. I explore this question in greater detail in the next two sections.

5 Research Design & Method

One of the challenges in identifying the role of parties in distributive politics in the modern era is that the types of spending typically described as “pork” are not usually very easy to link directly to MCs. Until recently, the sponsors of earmarks were not made public. The Federal Assistance Award Data System (FAADS), which has been the subject of a great deal of research, includes nearly all federal transfers (excluding defense spending) and thus involves many detailed decisions that are made not by members of Congress but rather by bureaucratic agencies. Of course, it may be enough for a legislator to give the “impression of influence” (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing

2014). But looking to congressional history provides a valuable opportunity to assess Congress' role in spending decisions since, at the time spanned by this analysis, significantly less authority over spending decisions was delegated to the executive branch prior to the budgeting changes of the 1920s and beyond. Moreover, examining funding decisions closer to the outset of programs' creation diminishes the potential impact of growing executive oversight as the program endures. As such, looking at public buildings in this era, a program over which Congress exercised direct control, allows me to overcome a key empirical challenge. Indeed, this legislation was wholly a product of congressional action. Unlike modern earmarks, which have become enmeshed in partisan politics and subjected to a good deal of scrutiny, both parties actively sought and received public building projects, and it is arguably easier to link proposed buildings to sponsors by virtue of the fact that most proposals were entered into the record via a formal bill introduction, unlike earmarks which were conventionally requested privately.

A second inferential challenge involves disentangling the confounding effects of the variables that one might expect to impact spending decisions. For instance, the increasing electoral margins of the era (particularly after the 1896 presidential election) make it difficult to distinguish effects attributable to district characteristics from those related to individual member characteristics. Moreover, there are surely unobservable characteristics that affect a district's demand for (and possibly likelihood of receiving) distributive outlays. To mitigate the impact of such observable and unobservable variables, while focusing primarily on the potential impact of majority party status, I adopt a difference-in-differences design for the analysis that follows. The approach incorporates both district- and congress-level fixed effects, with each unique district comprising a separate panel within stable redistricting plans. This results in a large, unbalanced panel of data. The congress fixed effects capture temporal variation in funding for public buildings, which rose over the period analyzed. The district-level fixed effects capture both observed and unobserved time-invariant characteristics of congressional districts.

One significant advantage for empirical analysis of districting plans prior to the reapportionment changes of the 1960s is that some states went for very long periods of time without redrawing boundaries (Engstrom 2013). Even additions to the number of congressional seats for a state after a census might not elicit alterations to the boundaries, as it was fairly common for states to add one or more at-large districts for a period of time before undertaking more dramatic changes. Thus, as

the Appendix describes in greater detail, I am able to take advantage of greater stability in district fixed effects (resulting in fewer omitted data points) than is true of similar models for the modern Congress.

To estimate the effect of changes in majority party status on federal building funds, I specify the following regression model:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta_1 Majority_{it} + \Psi \mathbf{X}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the measure of funding for public buildings indexed by district i and congress t . The models include both geographic (α) and time (δ) fixed effects via dichotomous variables for all but one district and one congress. The main independent variable of interest is a dichotomous indicator for *Majority* party status, equal to one when a district is represented by a majority party legislator and zero otherwise. The models also include a vector of other variables (\mathbf{X}_{it}) capturing time-varying legislator and district characteristics described below. Finally, β_0 is a constant term and ε_{it} is an error term, with standard errors clustered at the district level. The results are substantively the same if the errors are clustered by state.

Given the number of changes at play in this era of congressional history, I account for a number of variables that prior scholarship suggests could have an impact on the funding for public buildings allotted to districts, particularly those related to electoral reforms (Katz and Sala 1996; Wittrock et al. 2008) and the advantages accruing to members with long service in the chamber and advantaged committee posts (Krehbiel 1991). As such, the fully specified model controls for the use of the secret ballot, nominating primary, the size of the incumbent's electoral margin in the previous election, and member characteristics including age, terms of service, membership on the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, and status as a chair of any House committee.⁴

6 Results

The results of very preliminary analyses of the allocations for public buildings suggest a significant relationship between majority party status and the amount of money awarded to congressional districts. Table 1 presents estimates for the 54th to 63rd Congress (1897 to 1915), spanning the

⁴Committee membership was coded using Canon, Nelson, and Stewart (1998).

period in which the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds was successful in enacting a great deal of legislation. The first model simply estimates the effect of majority party status, conditional on district and congress-specific effects, on the funds allotted to each district. The coefficient for Majority status is positive and significant, with a sizable substantive effect of nearly \$7,500. Using the “economy cost” as the indicator of value in today’s dollars, that equates to \$3.8 million.⁵ In terms of the average cost of projects at that time, this roughly equated to the average cost of purchasing a site for public building.

The cost of projects varied significantly, largely as a function of the population of the city for which a building was proposed. While purchasing a site and erecting a building might cost just tens of thousands of dollars for a small town, the cost for major metropolitan areas could exceed a million dollars or more. This suggests that logging the dollar value of projects is probably a more appropriate approach to measuring the impact of the factors associated with spending on public buildings. Model 2 presents those results, again using a reduced form model that includes only the fixed effects and the majority party variable. The model fit is significantly better in this case, and the substantive impact of majority status is a nearly 40 percent increase in funding. This suggests that when a district gained (lost) majority party representation in the House, it stood to gain (lose) considerably in the federal funds game. Does the effect of majority party status stand up to the inclusion of member- and district-level variables that change over time? As evidenced by the results in Model 3, it does, with a substantive effect only slightly reduced (about a 37 percent increase in funding for districts moving to the majority party). The model also shows a significant effect on funds received by districts with a congressman on the Public Buildings and Grounds Committee, as well as for districts with elections contested using a secret ballot. While I am hesitant to draw too much inference from the latter, given the temporal changes in ballot use over time and the rapid shift to adoption, this finding is consistent with other work on the effects of electoral reform, which suggest that such changes drove members to cultivate credit-claiming opportunities.

Given the blunt nature in which the fixed effects capture time-invariant district characteristics, there is a risk that the effects of majority status described above are underestimated. Additionally,

⁵Calculations are based on 1910 dollars using the Measuring Worth project: <http://www.measuringworth.com/>.

Table 1: District-Level Spending on Public Buildings

	Raw \$		Logged \$
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Majority	7464.4*	0.390*	0.371*
	(3568.7)	(0.093)	(0.106)
Ballot			0.500*
			(0.237)
Primary			0.211
			(0.178)
Margin			0.003
			(0.003)
Age			-0.0121
			(0.008)
Terms			0.0414
			(0.030)
Public Bldgs.			1.279*
			(0.236)
Chair			0.289*
			(0.108)
Constant	-5254.7	4.303*	3.917*
	(4757.3)	(0.122)	(0.438)
Observations	3379	3379	3379
District FEs	706	706	706
R ²	0.114	0.525	0.533

Standard errors clustered on district in parentheses. All models include district and congress fixed effects.

* p < 0.05 (two-tailed).

the panel nature of the data requires much more attention to diagnostic and robustness checks than provided here. Further analysis is also warranted to rule out competing explanations and to further elucidate the nature of distributive politics in this era and on public buildings legislation more specifically.

Perhaps chief among the competing explanations to consider is the possibility of presidential influence. Much has been made in recent years about the role of the executive branch in distributing pork. A similar debate with important implications for understanding American political development has played out in this era as well, itself dealing with politics of the post office (Kernell and McDonald 1999; Carpenter 2001). Might it be the case, for instance, that while Congress authorized the construction of public buildings, the president and the Treasury Department played a hand in the implementation of those plans? After all, it was up to the Supervising Architect to draw up plans, solicit bids, and so forth. Each of these stages could represent an opportunity for executive discretion and this process is worth examining.

Additionally, and related to the implementation of public building plans, the unfolding of the appropriations process is a subject deserving scrutiny. For one, appropriations offer some empirical advantages in that, as recurring annual events, appropriations bills are less punctuated than the omnibus bills covered in the preceding analysis. Moreover, looking at the appropriations themselves would likely reveal any influence on the part of the executive branch, as Congress relied on agencies for information about costs and status. It is one thing for the authorizing committee to provide for a building, and it is another thing for the funds to be provided and the project to be carried out efficiently. I have found little evidence that the appropriations committees of the House and Senate played a gatekeeping role on the projects authorized prior to 1913, but it is clearly the case that many buildings received multiple and sometimes many appropriations in the years after authorization. This process is worth a closer look as well.

Finally, some additional data from this period and alternative modeling strategies may be worth incorporating into the study, although the cost of doing so would be significant. I have culled from the records of the House all proposed public building bills, and so it would be possible to construct a dataset at the city level. From there, using historical data on postal receipts and population, along with the location of nearby public buildings, it might be possible to construct a model that examines the “winners” and the “losers” based on various demand-side factors. On a related note,

it may be the case also that what I observe on public building spending is offset elsewhere, for instance on rivers and harbors legislation, the other major type of distributive bill arising in this period. Perhaps a more easily implemented alternative approach to using cities as the unit of analysis would be to use county boundaries rather than districts for the fixed effects, since county lines are much less subject to change (although that is less the case for this period than it is today).

7 Conclusion

This paper probes the link between congressional parties and the distributive outlays of the federal government. Using new data from a historical period that offers a unique vantage point on the interplay between careerist members of Congress, strong parties, and the executive branch, I find that members of Congress significantly ratcheted up their efforts to bring funds back to their districts. The number of bills introduced proposing funds for public buildings, as well as the number of buildings authorized by Congress, swelled significantly from the 1890s to the 1910s, just as legislators were solidifying Washington careers. The anecdotal evidence from the period is mixed in terms of the factors that affected allocation decisions, with many observers citing universalism and a lack of party or geographic manipulation while others angrily decried both the process and the omission of certain locales from the bonanza. I describe a rationale for why such legislation might have electoral benefits for members, as well as why parties might take a keen interest in steering funds to their members.

The preliminary analysis presented here, using data that links congressional districts over a 20-year period with all funding authorizations for public buildings in the U.S., suggests that the majority party sought and obtained advantage in the distribution of federal funds. Districts that saw a change in majority party status witnessed, on average, a nearly 40 percent increase in the funds allotted for public buildings. While these results are tentative, they speak to ongoing debates about the role of parties in Congress, even in this purportedly “partisan era” of congressional history. Moreover, they bring Congress back into a literature that, focusing on the modern era, has increasingly found more evidence of executive influence on distributive politics.

Appendix

Table A1: Continuity of Congressional District Plans by State, 53rd to 64th Congress

	53-54	54-55	55-56	56-57	57-58	58-59	59-60	60-61	61-62	62-63	63-64
AL	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	X
AZ	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	
AR	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
CA	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
CO	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	
CT	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X		X
DE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
FL	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	*	
GA	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	*	X		X
ID	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
IL		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	*	X
IN	X		X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	X
IA	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
KS	X	X	*	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X
KY	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
LA	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	X
ME	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
MD	X	*	*	X	*	X	X	X	X	X	X
MA	X	*	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
MI	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	*
MN	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	
MS	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	*	X	X
MO	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	X	X
MT	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
NE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NV	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NH	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NJ	*	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	*	X
NM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*	X
NY	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	X
NC	X	*	*	*		X	X	*	X	*	X
ND	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X		X
OH	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	*	*
OK	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	*	
OR	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
PA	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	*	*	X
RI	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
SC	*	X	*	X	*	X	X	X	X	X	X
SD	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
TN	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	X	X
TX	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	*	*	*
UT	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	
VT	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
VA	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X	*	X
WA	X	X	X	X	*	X	X		X	*	
WV	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	*	X
WI	X	X	X	X	*	X	X	X	X		X
WY	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note: An “X” indicates no geographic changes to district boundaries, while * identifies instances in which there was a change to some but not all districts in the state (including redistricting plans that simply involved adding one or more at-large districts to a previous plan). States that had not yet been admitted to the Union are identified by a -.

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