

The Particularistic President

Executive Branch Politics and Political Inequality

As the holders of the only office elected by the entire nation, presidents have long claimed to be sole stewards of the interests of all Americans. Scholars have largely agreed, positing the president as an important counterbalance to the parochial impulses of members of Congress. This supposed fact is often invoked in arguments for concentrating greater power in the executive branch. Douglas L. Kriner and Andrew Reeves challenge this notion and, through an examination of a diverse range of policies from disaster declarations, to base closings, to the allocation of federal spending, show that presidents, like members of Congress, are particularistic. Presidents routinely pursue policies that allocate federal resources in a way that disproportionately benefits their more narrow partisan and electoral constituencies. Though presidents publicly don the mantle of a national representative, in reality they are particularistic politicians who prioritize the needs of certain constituents over others.

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Introduction

More than a century ago, Woodrow Wilson, the only president of the American Political Science Association to become president of the United States, articulated a vision of the chief executive as the only actor in our system capable of representing and serving the interests of the nation as a whole. Contrasting members of Congress who are “representatives of localities” and “voted for only by sections of voters” with presidents who are elected by the nation, Wilson concluded that the presidency “is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people.” As a result, Wilson argued, when the president “speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest. If he rightly interprets the national thought and boldly insists upon it, he is irresistible.”¹

Wilson’s view continues to hold great currency today as scholars, pundits, and presidents themselves tout the office of the presidency as a universalistic counterbalance to Congress, whose members all too often put the interests of their constituents above those of the nation as a whole. While members of Congress are driven to pursue policies that benefit their narrow geographic constituencies, presidents alone take a broader view and pursue policies that maximize the general welfare. The contrasts are often held to be particularly acute in the realm of divide-the-dollar politics. As law professor and Federalist Society cofounder Steven Calabresi describes, the president is “our only constitutional backstop against the redistributive collective action problem.”² Members of Congress seek to “bring home the bacon” to their own constituencies. Presidents take a

¹ Wilson (1908, 67–68).

² Calabresi (1995, 35).

holistic view and instead seek policies that maximize outcomes for the country at large.

Undoubtedly, presidents do approach policy from a different perspective than do members of Congress, and they are often uniquely positioned to view political challenges through a national lens. But is the presidency really a “constitutional backstop” defending us from parochial policies rife with inefficiencies? We argue no, and throughout the book we show that electoral and partisan incentives combine to encourage presidents to pursue policies across a range of issues that systematically target benefits to politically valuable constituencies.

Presidents do have a national constituency, and voters hold them accountable for national outcomes. But we argue that this logic underlying the universalistic framework is fundamentally flawed. Voters hold presidents accountable for the state of the nation, but as we show in this book, voters also hold presidents responsible for how their local communities fare under presidential policies. Moreover, in an ironic twist reminiscent of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the Electoral College ensures that some voters are more equal than others.³ This combination of forces encourages presidents to prioritize the needs of some voters over others. Every four years, presidential candidates devote seemingly endless time, energy, and resources to courting voters, but not all voters. Rather, campaigns focus their efforts like a laser beam on a handful of swing states that will ultimately decide who will be the next president of the United States. The vast majority of the electorate is all but ignored.

But what happens after the last piece of confetti from the inaugural parade has fallen and the job of governing begins? Does the single-minded pursuit of swing state voters affect how presidents behave when they turn to govern the whole nation? Most existing scholarship argues no. We disagree: the compulsion for presidents to court swing state voters does not end when the election is over. Rather, we argue that presidents have a primal desire to secure reelection or to assure their party’s continued hold on the presidency to both defend and reinforce their legacy. This political impulse is so strong that it systematically causes the president to engage in particularistic behavior very much like the reelection-seeking parochialism of which members of Congress are accused.

³ After overthrowing Mr. Jones, the animals issued seven commandments, the last of which read: “All animals are equal.” By book’s end, the seven commandments had been replaced by a single commandment: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

Equally important for presidential behavior is the drive to please the partisan base. Reelection is not the only force that causes presidents to deviate from defending the interests of the whole nation. Modern presidents do not stand above the party. Rather, increasingly they are leaders of their political parties with strong ties to core partisan constituencies. Presidents frequently trumpet the need for bipartisanship in Washington and hold themselves up as national figures who can transcend partisan divisions. Barack Obama was not the first, nor will he be the last president to promise that he, or someday she, will bridge the partisan political divides in American politics. Yet despite the rhetoric, in practice presidents are partisan leaders motivated to seek what is best for their partisan base and for their partisan allies across the country. This, in turn, compels presidents to pursue policies that are more responsive to the base of their party than to the needs of the nation as a whole.

As a result, we offer a different conception of the presidency – one that is particularistic. When we say that presidents engage in particularism, we mean that they pursue policies that target public benefits disproportionately toward some political constituencies at the expense of others. As we shall see, presidential particularism can take many forms and serve a variety of objectives related to both electoral and partisan goals. The particularistic president routinely pursues policies that disproportionately benefit a small fraction of his tens of millions of constituents.

What concern is it if presidents favor some constituents over others? We argue that the scope of presidential particularism is vast; consequently, it produces skewed outcomes across a gamut of policy venues. It also has stark implications for the American constitutional framework. The contemporary American political system is more polarized than it has been in more than a century. Budgetary brinkmanship, government shutdowns, debt ceiling defaults, and the repeated failures of political leaders to grapple with the pressing issues of the day have given rise to a widespread belief that the federal government is broken. Trust in government has fallen to new lows, and public confidence in the country's direction has eroded significantly.⁴ To confront this institutional malaise, a growing chorus calls for the delegation of more power to the president as a means of breaking through the dysfunction that has rendered Congress all but incapable of enacting policies that serve the national

⁴ Justin Sink, "Poll: Government trust nears record low," *The Hill*, October 19, 2013. <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/329423-poll-trust-in-government-nears-record-low>.

interest.⁵ To these critics we urge caution. While the presidency may have institutional advantages over Congress in taking swift action in times of crisis – as Alexander Hamilton argued in *Federalist* 70 – there is no guarantee that presidents will use more power to pursue outcomes that will make the nation as a whole better off. Rather, our analysis strongly suggests another outcome: that greater delegation to the executive will replace congressional parochialism with presidential particularism.

1.1 A Tale of Two Obamas

During every administration, presidents pursue different goals. Sometimes they pursue policies as the utilitarian-in-chief with an eye toward maximizing the welfare of as many citizens as possible. In these cases, presidents are not driven by special interests (economic, issue based, geographic, or otherwise) and instead pursue policies that are in the best interests of the nation as a whole. We call this perspective the *universalistic presidency*.⁶ At other times, the president will engage in decidedly particularistic behaviors that disproportionately benefit some voters more than others. Consider, for example, the following two cases from President Barack Obama's first term. In the first, President Obama appears very much the universalistic counterpart to congressional parochialism and inefficiencies, as envisioned by the conventional wisdom. In the second, however, President Obama appears to embrace particularism in ways that patently serve his electoral interests rather than the national interest.

1.1.1 *Mr. Obama Goes to Washington*

Less than two months into his first term as president, Barack Obama found himself at loggerheads with congressional leaders of his own party. The culprit was earmarks, or the line items in an appropriations bill that allocate money for specific projects in a state or district. The 110th Congress and President George W. Bush had never been able to reach agreement on nine appropriations bills to keep the federal government

⁵ Howell and Moe (2013, forthcoming); Kagan (2001); Mann and Ornstein (2013).

⁶ In applying the term *universalistic* to the presidency, we use it in a different way than most of the congressional politics literature. The universalistic president eschews parochialism and instead pursues policies that serve the national interest, rather than the more narrow interests of politically important constituencies. Within the congressional literature, universalism refers to the logrolling process through which all members see benefits in order to build a large legislative coalition (Weingast, 1979).

funded through fiscal year 2009. As a result, President Obama entered office with a government funded solely by continuing resolutions, or temporary measures that funded the government only in the short term. Without additional action, the federal government would shut down, leaving 2.7 million government employees out of work and suspending many services relied on by millions of citizens.

The administration's first priority upon taking power, however, was to pass an economic stimulus bill to buoy the failing economy, which was in a free fall. While paeans to bipartisanship filled the air in the days immediately following the new president's inauguration, as January turned into February, the prospects for bipartisan accord were fading quickly. Eventually, Obama and Democratic congressional leaders crafted an almost \$800 billion stimulus bill that, despite containing a generous helping of tax cuts along with targeted spending programs, passed both chambers with only three Republican votes.

Having achieved its first major legislative success, the administration could not rest on its laurels. The continuing resolution funding the government expired on March 11, and trouble was brewing in Congress, but this time from the Democratic side of the aisle. During the 2008 campaign, then-Senator Obama had trumpeted his anti-earmark credentials during his two years in the Senate and promised to continue fighting legislative waste as president. In the first presidential debate on September 26, 2008, candidate Obama promised: "We need earmark reform, and when I'm president, I will go line by line to make sure that we are not spending money unwisely."⁷ Although congressional Democrats had modestly reformed the earmark process during the 110th Congress, the version of the omnibus appropriations bill working its way through the Democratically controlled House and Senate was loaded with congressional pork. According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, the final version contained more than 8,500 earmark provisions that totaled \$7.7 billion in proposed spending.

Despite Obama having campaigned in 2008 as a transformational leader who would bridge partisan divides, the administration's failure to secure even a single Republican vote for the stimulus was a harbinger of things to come. The president would need unified support among Democrats for health care reform, the signature initiative of his first term. Indeed in the Senate, where sixty votes were essential to break

⁷ http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/TEXTANALYZER_TRANSCRIPT1.xml.

a Republican-led filibuster, the administration would likely need every single Democrat to carry the day against a unified Republican opposition. Nevertheless, having railed against earmarks as serving parochial interests at the expense of the national interest, the president confronted members of his own party over the appropriations bill. However, Majority Leader Harry Reid refused to budge even in the face of pressure from a co-partisan president, and admonished his erstwhile junior Senate colleague to respect congressional prerogatives. Reid warned that crusading against earmarks, which were essential to the electoral needs of many members, would grind the legislative process to a halt.

On the other side of the aisle, many Republicans demanded the president veto the omnibus bill. These public cries against pork belied the explosive increase of earmarks under previous Republican Congresses during the Bush era. Moreover, many Republicans, including some calling for Obama to veto the omnibus because of the earmarks, had inserted their own earmarks into the legislation. Indeed, a full 40 percent of earmarked funding was requested by Republican members of Congress.⁸ Rather, Republican demands for a veto were designed to embarrass the president and drive a wedge between Obama and his party.

Ultimately, President Obama backed down and signed the legislation, earmarks intact, into law. Despite losing this round, even as he signed the omnibus bill, Obama announced new guidelines for future earmarks, including greater transparency and a requirement for competitive bids for federal projects. Yet even these commonsense restrictions were met with little enthusiasm on Capitol Hill. For example, while Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye voiced basic agreement in principle with the requirement for competitive bids by private corporations for earmarked funds, he insisted that his committee would retain ultimate authority over such appropriations. Similarly, Democratic House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer showed remarkably little deference to his party's president seeking to rein in congressional pork, noting that, when it came to pork, the White house could not "tell us what to do."⁹

1.1.2 As Goes Ohio, So Goes the Nation

The 2009 budget battle aptly illustrates presidential universalism. President Obama battled parochial legislators who were more concerned with

⁸ David Clarke, "Earmarks: Here to stay or facing extinction?" *CQ Weekly*, March 16, 2009, p. 613. Paul Krawzak and Kathleen Hunter, "Work completed on '09 omnibus," *CQ Weekly*, March 16, 2009, p. 612.

⁹ Woodward (2012, 26–27).

procuring goodies for their own districts than protecting the public purse from waste and abuse. However, in other policy venues, President Obama appeared to engage in his own form of particularistic politics. Consider, for example, President Obama's varied efforts to shower residents of the Buckeye State with federal largesse.

Eight years had passed since the 2004 election, but in 2012 the political situation remained uncannily similar in at least one regard. The election appeared to hinge on Ohio. The incumbent, President Obama, faced a stiff challenge from the Republican nominee, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. The race was based largely on the president's stewardship of the economy. The country was divided, with most states either clearly blue or plainly red. Ohio again stood poised to play a deciding role in the upcoming election. In 2004, President George W. Bush narrowly won reelection by a 286–251 vote in the Electoral College. Ohio's twenty hotly contested electoral votes provided the slender margin of victory. Although Bush won the national popular vote by more than three million, if 60,000 Ohioans had switched their votes from Bush to John Kerry, the Democratic challenger would have secured the presidency.

In the spring of 2012, President Obama's advisors studied the electoral map and saw a similar scenario unfolding. Most were confident that the president, despite the sluggish economy, would continue to hold New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the West Coast. A number of Mid-western states, including Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, also seemed likely to end up in the president's column. Holding these states and adding New Mexico, where demographic changes continued to swing the state toward the Democrats, would put Obama at 251 electoral votes. Winning Ohio and its eighteen electoral votes would require Romney to run the table – to hold the Deep South and also carry the battlegrounds of Nevada, Colorado, and Iowa – just to force an Electoral College tie. Whereas President Obama held several paths to 270 without Ohio, a loss in Ohio would all but doom Romney's electoral fortunes.

In contrast to other swing states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, or Illinois, Ohio had leaned Republican in recent presidential contests. Yet, the Obama campaign liked the odds. This was in large part because of the administration's politically risky bailout of General Motors and Chrysler. As the election year began, the auto bailout was hardly popular nationwide. A February 2012 Gallup poll showed only 44 percent of Americans approving "of the financial bailout for US automakers that were in danger of failing," contrasted with 51 percent disapproving of

the president's action.¹⁰ But things were different in Ohio. In rescuing the auto industry, the administration had saved more than a million jobs, many of which were located in the counties hugging Ohio's Lake Erie coast. The November election exit polls showed nearly 60 percent of Ohio voters supporting the bailouts, and of those supporters, roughly three-quarters voted to reelect the president.¹¹

Yet, bailing out the automotive industry was not the only gambit made by the Obama administration to benefit Ohio voters. Throughout his first term, the president visited Ohio again and again to take credit for federal grant programs and awards that had created jobs in the Buckeye State. For example, the administration had long championed the development of alternative energy. On one tour of the state, the president highlighted the decision to award federal dollars to Ohio's own Ashlawn Energy, which would expand production of vanadium redox fuel cells thanks to an award from the Department of Energy's Smart Grid Program. In announcing the grant at a small business forum in Cleveland, President Obama also emphasized Ashlawn's commitment to retraining workers from the local community in Painesville, Ohio, for the new jobs that would be created.¹² In all, Ohio companies received more than \$125 million of clean energy grants, nearly four times the national state average. Indeed, President Obama reminded voters of this fact on a 2010 trip through the state, telling the crowd that Ohio had "received more funds than just about anybody in order to build on that clean energy economy... almost \$25 million of our investment went to a plant right here in Elyria that's helping produce the car batteries of the future. That's what we're going to keep on doing for the rest of 2010 and 2011 and 2012, until we've got this country working again."¹³

Other sectors of the Ohio economy would also benefit. When, in March 2012, the president announced plans for the creation of a new network

¹⁰ Gallup/USA Today Poll, February 20–21, 2012, USAIPOUSA2012-TR0220.

¹¹ Keith Lang, "Road to President Obama's win in Ohio paved by support for auto bailout," *The Hill*, November 7, 2012. <http://thehill.com/blogs/transportation-report/automobiles/266691-auto-bailout-paved-the-road-for-obamas-ohio-win->.

¹² Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Closing Session of the Winning the Future Forum on Small Business in Cleveland, Ohio," February 22, 2011. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=89477.

¹³ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session in Elyria, Ohio," January 22, 2010. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=87444>.

of manufacturing centers across the country, the first grant awarded was to a group from Youngstown, Ohio. Similarly, although passenger rail service between Cincinnati and Cleveland had ended more than forty years prior, in 2010 the Obama administration sought to revive this route and others in Ohio through \$400 million of transportation grant funding. Even in terms of Race to the Top education grants, the allocation of which is overseen by independent educators, Ohio emerged a clear winner, securing the fourth-highest grant total of any state.¹⁴

Moreover, in a campaign that would evolve into an argument over which candidate could do more for small businesses, the president was quick to emphasize to Ohio voters how new grants from the Small Business Administration (SBA) would bolster the local economy. After attending a conference on small business creation in Cleveland – the seat of Cuyahoga County, which the president would need to win heavily to carry the state in November – President Obama touted the many ways in which his administration was channeling federal dollars into projects that would benefit the local economy. One grant would bolster the Flex-Matters cluster, which aimed to make Cleveland a global leader in the development and production of flexible electronics. High tech in Ohio was not the only winner, however. Micelli Dairy Products received what was the largest SBA grant awarded to date in an effort to increase its production of ricotta cheese and to expand its product line to include mozzarella and provolone. Obama jovially proclaimed this “one of the tastiest investments the government has ever made” and noted that the grant directly led to the creation of sixty jobs at the Buckeye Road facility in Cleveland.¹⁵ In all, in 2012 the administration approved 2,726 loans for small businesses in Ohio, a figure that well surpassed the totals secured by many states with significantly larger populations.¹⁶

We could present many more illustrations of presidents – Democrats and Republicans alike – pursuing policies that target benefits to key

¹⁴ Jerry Markon and Alice Crites, “Obama showering Ohio with attention and money,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2012. www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision/2012/obama-showering-ohio-with-attention-and-money/2012/09/25/8ab15a68-019e-11e2-b260-32f4a8db9b7e_story.html.

¹⁵ Barack Obama, “Remarks at the Closing Session of the Winning the Future Forum on Small Business in Cleveland, Ohio,” February 22, 2011. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=89477.

¹⁶ Jerry Markon and Alice Crites, “Obama showering Ohio with attention and money,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision/2012/obama-showering-ohio-with-attention-and-money/2012/09/25/8ab15a68-019e-11e2-b260-32f4a8db9b7e_story.html.

constituencies for political gain. President Reagan famously backtracked on his free-trade rhetoric to protect the steel industry in key swing states during the lead-up to the 1984 elections. Four years later and despite solid steel profits, George H. W. Bush vowed to renew protectionist measures in pursuit of votes in steel-producing states.¹⁷ In 1996, the *Wall Street Journal* accused Bill Clinton of “playing Santa Claus” to win reelection, for example by awarding \$35 million in seed money for economic development projects with a heavy geographic bias toward swing states and California.¹⁸ And as Pennsylvania voters prepared to head to the polls in 2004, the Bush administration dispatched the Secretary of Energy to the key swing state to announce more than \$100 million worth of energy and clean coal funding; critics charged that Bush was “setting a new standard for preelection pork.”¹⁹

However, such an approach would offer only a limited understanding of the forces driving presidential behavior. Because of the difficulties inherent in generalizing and extrapolating from a handful of cases, which are rarely picked at random, in the chapters that follow we analyze a comprehensive array of data to test whether the universalistic or particularistic paradigm best fits presidential politics. Through this data, we endeavor to show that the preceding case of President Obama consciously targeting federal resources to the pivotal battleground state of Ohio is not the exception that proves the rule, but rather the norm in contemporary politics. Presidents routinely pursue policies that disproportionately benefit their core partisan base and electorally pivotal swing constituencies. Moreover, patterns in the extent to which presidents engage in core and swing constituency targeting vary systematically with the electoral cycle. Presidents consistently pursue policies that benefit core partisan constituencies over parts of the country that back the opposition throughout their term in office. However, as the next election draws near, presidents increasingly target policy benefits toward swing constituencies as well.

The image of the president as a universalistic counterbalance to the rampant particularism of Congress is so deeply embedded in our national consciousness that we often accept it on blind faith. Yet this vision is not

¹⁷ “The high cost of steel quotas,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 1989, <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-02-19/news/8903060951-1-steel-quotas-steel-industry-subsidized-foreign-steel>.

¹⁸ Michael Frisby, “Despite funding cuts, Clinton manages to use power of the purse to get votes,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 1996, A20.

¹⁹ Michael Dobbs, “Run-up to vote is season for U.S. largesse,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2004, A23.

supported by a systematic assessment of the data. Through a series of analyses of presidential action in policy areas ranging from trade politics to disaster declarations, as well as a comprehensive analysis of the allocation of all federal grant dollars across the country from 1984 to 2008, we examine the extent to which presidents actually serve as a brake on the parochial impulses of Congress. The results of our analysis are unambiguous: the president does not serve as an equalizing, countervailing force against the particularistic pursuits of legislators. In fact, we find that presidents pursue their own brand of particularism that resembles what conventional accounts have led us to expect from Congress. Presidents systematically use their leverage over policies from base closings to budgets to target federal benefits to battleground states in search of votes; to reward their core partisan base; and to help members of their party in Congress. What sets presidents apart, rather, is their success in achieving these goals. Our data show that the inequalities arising from presidential particularism, across a number of policies, dwarf those arising from congressional parochialism. For example, in Chapter 5 we estimate that in 2008 four states – Florida, Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania – received more than a billion dollars of additional grant spending simply by virtue of being swing states. Moreover, we show that states that reliably back the president's party at the polls receive hundreds of millions of dollars more in federal grants each year than do similar states that instead reliably back the opposition party in presidential elections. For red and blue states, who sits in the Oval Office can mean the difference in billions of dollars of federal spending.

In uncovering and measuring the extent of presidential particularism, we do not argue that the universalistic paradigm is baseless. Undoubtedly, presidents do pursue different interests and policies than do members of Congress. And plainly, presidents may sometimes take a more national view than do individual legislators who are tied to more narrow geographic constituencies. However, in many policy areas and particularly when it comes to the distribution of federal dollars to specific constituencies, we find that universalism routinely gives way to particularism.

1.2 Presidential Universalism

The snapshot of President Obama's first budget battle echoes what is perceived to be a larger truism in American politics. More often than not, the primary focus of individual members of Congress is the needs of their narrow geographic constituencies. By contrast, presidents take

a broader view and pursue the interests of the nation as a whole rather than the parochial interests of a few. This conventional assessment of the competing interests of our political institutions is widely espoused by pundits and scholars. And presidents themselves have gone to great lengths to imprint this contrast on the nation's collective psyche.

Virtually every chief executive from George Washington to Barack Obama has publicly proclaimed that unlike members of Congress, who are so responsive to parochial concerns, presidents are, by the very construction of the office, stewards of the nation as a whole. In a 1795 letter to the Selectmen of Boston, President Washington wrote: "In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow citizens. My system for the attainment of this object has uniformly been to overlook all personal, local, and partial considerations; to contemplate the United States as one great whole... and to consult only the substantial and permanent interest of our country."²⁰ More than two centuries later, President Obama sounded a similar note while championing additional infrastructure programs in his 2013 State of the Union address. Investing in the nation's aging infrastructure was good for America. However, to heighten his proposal's appeal to reluctant members of Congress, the president playfully and a bit mockingly reminded members of the direct benefits an infrastructure program would yield for their individual constituencies. Investment in infrastructure creates jobs, Obama argued. To members of Congress he teased that "I know that you want these job-creating projects in your districts. I've seen you all at the ribbon-cuttings."²¹

This vision of a universalistic presidency also features prominently in a great deal of presidency scholarship from across academic disciplines. For example, legal scholars routinely use the assumption of universalism to justify the expansion of presidential power and influence over the administrative state. Before her appointment to the Supreme Court, Elena Kagan argued that an increased role for a president-led bureaucracy in policy formulation and implementation would lead to more normatively desirable policy outcomes that better serve the national interest. "Because the President has a national constituency," Kagan argued, "he is likely to consider, in setting the direction of administrative policy on an ongoing

²⁰ Quoted in Wood (2009, 6).

²¹ Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," February 12, 2013. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=102826.

basis, the preferences of the general public, rather than merely parochial interests.”²² Summarizing the field, Jide Nzelibe concludes: “One of the most widespread contemporary assumptions in the discourse about the separation of powers is that while the president tends to have preferences that are more national and stable in nature, Congress is perpetually prone to parochial concerns.”²³

Within political science, many argue that presidents pursue more representative policies in part because of the very institutional structure of their office.²⁴ Terry Moe, in particular, has championed this view, arguing that presidents alone are held accountable for the performance of the whole government.²⁵ By contrast, legislators “have their eyes on their own electoral fortunes, and thus on the special (often local) interests that can bring them security and popularity.” As a result, for members of Congress “politics is not about the system!” rather “it is about the pieces and about special interests.”²⁶ Presidents, by contrast, are motivated by different, more national interests. As a result, “they think in grander terms about social problems and the public interest, and they tend to resist specialized

²² Kagan (2001, 2335). Kagan acknowledges that such arguments can be taken too far and even suggests that in some instances presidents may be more responsive to particular interests than national ones. However, Kagan (2001, 2336) concludes: “Take the President out of the equation and what remains [particularly members of Congress on key committees] are individuals and entities with a far more tenuous connection to national majoritarian preferences and interests.”

²³ Jide Nzelibe. 2006. “The fable of the national president and the parochial Congress.” *UCLA Law Review* 53: 1217–1273, p. 1218. For additional legal scholarship in this vein, see: Jerry Marshaw. 1997. *Greed, Chaos, and Governance: Using Public Choice to Improve Public Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Steven Calabresi. 1995. “Some normative arguments for the unitary executive.” *Arkansas Law Review* 48: 23–104. Lawrence Lessig and Cass Sunstein. 1994. “The president and the administration.” *Columbia Law Review* 94: 1–123. In his critique of this literature, Nzelibe argues that the Electoral College may compel the president to cater to an even narrower constituency than the median member of Congress does, and he argues that while individual members of Congress may be shortsighted, collectively they will often pursue policies that are more representative of the interests of the nation as a whole than any single individual would.

²⁴ Another branch of presidency scholarship argues that norms of behavior encourage presidents to behave in a universalistic fashion. For example, Cronin and Genovese (2004, 198) argue that “Once in office, presidents often bend over backward in their attempt to minimize the partisan appearance of their actions. . . . Presidents are not supposed to act with their eyes on the next election; they are not supposed to favor any particular group or party.” See Wood (2009) for a full overview of this literature. For similar sentiments, see, among others, Bond and Smith (2008); Cohen and Nice (2003); Edwards et al. (2008); Patterson (1990); Pika et al. (2006).

²⁵ Moe and Wilson (1994).

²⁶ Moe and Wilson (1994, 427).

appeals.” Moreover, because presidents “are held uniquely responsible by the public for virtually every aspect of national performance, and because their leadership and their legacies turn on effective governance,”²⁷ they have strong incentives to pursue a coherent national agenda that maximizes outcomes for the country as a whole.²⁸

This basic argument is formalized in recent game theoretic research by William Howell, Saul Jackman, and Jon Rogowski. In *The Wartime President*, Howell and colleagues begin by noting that policies made in Washington have both national and local outcomes; they then model the policy implications of the relative weights that politicians attach to the national and local ramifications of public policy choices. Members of Congress, Howell and colleagues argue, are attentive to both the national and the local consequences of policy choices made in Washington. Presidents, by contrast, face a truly national electorate and thus approach policy differently. “Presidents focus on the national implications of public policies while members of Congress monitor the effects of public policy on both the nation as a whole and their local constituencies – and, crucially, often these emphases are in conflict with one another.”²⁹

²⁷ Moe and Wilson (1994, 428).

²⁸ In a similar vein, game theoretic scholarship on delegation has long argued that presidents prefer more nationally optimal policy outcomes than do legislators who pursue more narrow, particularistic interests. For example, writing on trade policy, Lohmann and O’Halloran (1994, 509) note: “The President . . . has a national constituency and cares about the losses incurred by all districts. If given discretionary powers to set trade policy, the President would implement measures that trade off the marginal benefits derived from protecting industries in one district against the marginal costs imposed on all other districts.”

²⁹ Howell et al. (2013, 31–32). Indeed, Howell et al.’s main contention is that only significant exogenous shocks, such as major, nationally unifying wars, can encourage members to place greater weight on the national component. When this happens, policy inexorably moves toward the president’s preferences and away from the more inefficient, parochial policies that Congress would otherwise pursue if left to its own devices. Echoing David Lewis and Terry Moe (2010, 370), Howell and colleagues argue that presidents care only about national outcomes. At one point, the model is generalized to account for the possibility that presidents may care about both national and localized outcomes; however, it is always assumed that presidents care more about national outcomes than do members of Congress: “There is good reason to suspect that, at all times, the President is judged primarily on (and hence cares primarily about) his achievements at the national level. Local events may occasionally figure into his thinking, but in the main the President concerns himself primarily with the national implications of policy. Meanwhile, legislators feel pressure to appeal to the relatively more parochial interests of their constituent base. Therefore, when comparing a President and a Legislator, it seems natural to assume that, at all times, the President places relatively more weight on national outcomes than does the Legislator” (54–55).

Thus, Howell and colleagues' model suggests that legislators may oscillate back and forth between acting parochially and more universalistically, depending on the relative weight they place on national and local consequences at a given moment.³⁰ By contrast, presidents, "because they care only about national policy outcomes," are decidedly more universalistic in their orientations and pursue policies that maximize outcomes for the nation as a whole.³¹ Taken to its logical conclusion, this model suggests that when Congress defers more to presidential preferences, the country benefits.

But why are presidents inherently more universalistic in orientation than are members of Congress? Political science scholarship has suggested two answers. First, presidents simply may be less influenced by electoral concerns than legislators. In *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, David Mayhew revolutionized the study of legislative politics by arguing that much of what happens in Congress – from how the House and Senate are organized to how members spend the bulk of their time to the types of policies members pursue and, conversely, eschew – can be understood by positing that members act as if they are single-minded seekers of reelection.³² Popular appeals to constituents back home often appear more important to members than does the hard work of compromise and enacting legislation for the nation as a whole. And logically so, Mayhew argues, as the former are much more important than the latter to maximizing a member's reelection prospects. To be sure, as Richard Fenno has argued, members of Congress also desire personal power within the

³⁰ As such, Howell and colleagues argue that members of Congress routinely pursue policies and amendments that minimize the costs and maximize the benefits for their constituencies, even if the result is considerable inefficiency for the nation as a whole. For example, while the lofty objective of the Affordable Care Act was to ensure equal access to quality health care for all Americans, Senators Ben Nelson and Mary Landrieu, among others, used their clout to procure a better deal for Nebraska and Louisiana, respectively, in maneuvers popularized as the Cornhusker Kickback and the Louisiana Purchase. Even long-time universal health care advocates, such as Joe Lieberman, sought concessions – in Lieberman's case, additional protections for the insurance industry, which is largely headquartered in his home state of Connecticut. Agricultural state representatives routinely battle for the continuation of long-outdated New Deal subsidies and price supports or for ethanol subsidies, even when the result is artificially heightened food prices that must be borne by the entire nation. And many conservative members of Congress, some of whom welcomed federal aid after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, cast a vote against the "fiscally irresponsible" federal aid for the northeastern states hit hard by Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

³¹ Howell et al. (2013, 58).

³² Mayhew (1974a).

institution as well as sound public policy.³³ Yet, in an institution grounded on the seniority norm and in which influence is cultivated and developed over decades, continual reelection to the chamber is all but a prerequisite to achieving these goals.

Presidents, by contrast, enter office with vastly different power prospects and significantly shorter time horizons. In sharp contrast to a freshman member of the House, a newly elected president assumes office quite possibly at the height of his power. As a result, for presidents reelection is only loosely related to exercising power and influence in Washington. Barred at first by precedent and then by law from seeking a third term, presidents are not preoccupied with an electoral sword of Damocles constantly dangling above their heads. Their more finite time horizons in power combined with the unique characteristics and powers of their office combine to give presidents both the incentives and the tools to seek and exercise power as quickly as possible to maximize their influence on policy.³⁴ Power-seeking presidents are free and institutionally encouraged to eschew parochial and even electoral concerns and instead focus intently on the national consequences of policy decisions. In so doing, presidents will have the greatest long-term impact on the course of the nation and single-mindedly pursue power to build bold legacies as national leaders.³⁵

Some may be skeptical of the idea that presidents are only weakly motivated by electoral calculations. Perhaps this was once true, but superficially it seems hard to believe given the rise of the permanent campaign that has transformed contemporary politics. Presidents frequently take their priorities directly to the electorate in what Samuel Kernell calls “going public.”³⁶ Jeffrey Cohen has also detailed the increasing specialization and microtargeting of presidential messaging, a trend that he has called “going local.”³⁷ Both of these developments reflect presidential efforts to sell their legislative initiatives in a manner indistinguishable from campaigning. With reelection battles beginning earlier and earlier, in politics today it is not uncommon to see clear signs that presidents are putting themselves on a campaign footing immediately after the midterm elections if not even before them.

However, even if we accept that presidents, like members of Congress, are significantly influenced by electoral calculations, most scholarship

³³ Fenno (1978).

³⁴ Howell and Brent (2013).

³⁵ Moe and Wilson (1994).

³⁶ Kernell (1997).

³⁷ Cohen (2010).

suggests that electoral pressures drive presidents and members of Congress in opposite directions. Subscribing to what Wood (2009, 19) labels a “centrist view of representation,” presidency scholarship in this vein argues that electoral pressures encourage presidents to respond not to specific geographic constituencies like members of Congress, but to the national median voter.

Most immediately, these divergent expectations are derived from the different constituencies of legislators and presidents. First and foremost, members of the United States Congress are elected to serve the interests of the narrow geographic constituencies that elect them. The Speaker of the House may be third in line to the White House and among the most powerful officeholders in Washington; however, to return to the Capitol every two years, he or she must win election only from a district of approximately seven hundred thousand residents. Regardless of whether a representative views her role primarily as a Burkean trustee to act as guardian of the interests of her constituents or as a pure delegate charged with mirroring the wishes of a majority of her constituents, that member inevitably faces strong electoral incentives to prioritize the needs and wants of her constituents over those of citizens in other parts of the country.

The president, by contrast, is the only government official (besides the vice president) elected by a national constituency. Alexander Hamilton recognized the implications of this when he argued in *Federalist 68* that, while members of the House or Senate needed to appeal to a subset of their own narrow constituency to gain office, presidents had to appeal to the country as a whole. In stark contrast to parliamentary systems such as Great Britain’s, in the U.S. constitutional system only by securing “the esteem and confidence of the whole Union” can a candidate gain and hold the office of chief executive. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl argues that presidents since at least Andrew Jackson have used their method of election to claim a popular mandate for their policy agendas. On Jackson, Dahl writes that “[i]n justifying his use of the veto against Congressional majorities, as the only national official who had been elected by all the people and not just by a small fraction, as were Senators and Representatives, Jackson insisted that he alone could claim to represent all the people.”³⁸ Thus, a president seeking to maximize his electoral prospects need not pander to narrow geographic constituencies; rather, presidents

³⁸ While presidents themselves have repeatedly pointed to their national constituency as justifying their unique place in our system, Dahl (2001, 69) and other democratic theorists have expressed considerable skepticism.

need only respond to centrist opinion and pursue policies that maximize outputs for the greatest number of people.

Brandice Canes-Wrone presents a theory of presidential responsiveness that nicely combines these two perspectives.³⁹ Echoing Moe, Howell, and others, she argues that most presidents most of the time pursue their vision of good public policy with an eye toward bolstering their historical legacies. However, as a reelection contest nears, some presidents – specifically those with middling approval ratings – may perceive electoral pressures to deviate from the policies they consider best. Ironically, voters prefer candidates who are unlikely to pander to them, and who instead will pursue optimal policies in the best interest of the nation. However, uncertainty limits their ability to judge candidates' competence, and thus when heading to the voting booth they are often forced to rely on whether a president champions policies that voters perceive to be consistent with their preferences and interests. Thus, in the lead-up to an election, some presidents may succumb to electoral pressure and cater to the policy preferences of the national median voter. The end result is a fortuitous and virtuous cycle in which ambitious presidential office seekers are compelled by the institutional design of the presidency to pursue policies that either maximize the general welfare or that respond to the will of centrist median voters – a far cry from the parochialism lamented in Congress.

Claims of presidential universalism are more than just idle rhetoric. Rather, the universalistic paradigm also informs policy prescriptions. Specifically, it has led many to call for greater delegation to the executive branch in the belief that it will lead to more efficient policies responsive to the median American. In response to clear signs of dysfunction on Capitol Hill, a growing chorus of scholars has called for increased delegation to the executive branch. For example, Elena Kagan has written at length defending the growth of what she has termed “presidential administration.”⁴⁰ Through a variety of levers, presidents since Reagan have sought to increase their control over the administrative state and policy implementation. Critics lament such developments as presidential power grabs that undermine Congress's constitutional prerogatives to insulate discretion delegated to executive agencies from presidential influence.⁴¹ Yet, Kagan defends increased presidential authority over bureaucratic policy implementation on both constitutional and, perhaps even more

³⁹ Canes-Wrone (2006).

⁴⁰ Kagan (2001).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Pildes and Sunstein (1995).

important, normative grounds.⁴² Whereas accountability and efficiency in bureaucratic policymaking are often held to be in tension, Kagan argues that both can be achieved through enhanced presidential administrative control. “Because the public holds Presidents, and often Presidents alone, responsible for so many aspects of governmental performance, Presidents have a large stake in ensuring an administration that works, at least in the eyes of the public.”⁴³ The end result, for Kagan, is that “presidential direction thus represents the best accommodation of democratic and efficiency values.”⁴⁴ The need for greater presidential authority is only heightened in an era of highly polarized divided government. “These new circumstances,” Kagan concludes, “create a need for institutional reforms that will strengthen the President’s ability to provide energetic leadership in an inhospitable political environment.”⁴⁵

Similarly, congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, while more cautious in their call for greater delegation to the executive, argue that the contemporary Congress is so fundamentally broken that greater presidential initiative may provide at least a partial corrective for the present congressional malaise. While noting that presidential power has already expanded dramatically in recent decades at the expense of the legislature, Mann and Ornstein conclude that further “modest shifts to give more leeway to the executive make sense, given the current and continuing dysfunction.”⁴⁶

Presidency scholars Terry Moe and William Howell have more forcefully called for expanded presidential power to rescue the country from its institutional dysfunction. Noting the myriad problems the United States

⁴² Regarding the former, Kagan (2001, 2251) argues that “statutory delegation to an executive agency official – although not to an independent agency head – usually should be read as allowing the President to assert directive authority, as Clinton did, over the exercise of the delegated discretion.”

⁴³ Kagan (2001, 2339).

⁴⁴ Kagan (2001, 2341). Similarly, Yale University Law Professor Jerry Mashaw vigorously claims that expansive delegation of policymaking to the bureaucracy would strengthen democratic accountability because of the president’s natural institutional advantages in leading the bureaucracy. In stark contrast to members of Congress, Mashaw (1985, 95) argues, “the president has no particular constituency to which he or she has special responsibility to deliver benefits.” Rather, presidents will pursue policies that more closely mirror the interests of the nation as a whole through bureaucratic decision-making procedures than policies whose details were specified in the hall of Congress and its committee rooms. Moreover, Mashaw argues that bureaucratic policymaking may even be more democratically accountable than legislative policymaking precisely because presidents are elected by the nation as a whole on the basis of national, not local, issues.

⁴⁵ Kagan (2001, 2344).

⁴⁶ Mann and Ornstein (2013, 166).

faces, from climate change to skyrocketing debt and the global financial crisis to the ongoing war on terror, they ask who within our system of governance is best positioned to craft genuine solutions. Congress, they argue, is not the answer: "Truth be told, Congress is unlikely to provide the leadership needed to identify and design solutions for the nation's most trenchant social problems. Its very character as a collective decision-making body nearly guarantees that it won't. Leadership is a scarce commodity among the 535 independently elected members who make up Congress, each with radically different views about what good policy looks like. . . . It comes as no surprise, then, that the recent history of legislative activity is littered with bills that, in name, promise to confront challenges of national importance, but that in fact constitute little more than disfigured conglomerations of sectional initiatives."⁴⁷ Instead, expanded presidential power is the nation's best hope for grappling with contemporary challenges in a rational way that reflects the needs of the nation as a whole.

1.3 Presidential Particularism

When deciding on questions of war and peace, the scope and extent of gun control laws, or the optimal level of federal spending and revenues, presidents may routinely take a more holistic, national view than do many members of Congress.⁴⁸ Yet, when implementing public policy – when determining who gets what and when – we argue that presidents are also highly particularistic, systematically favoring the needs of some constituents over others. For example, when deciding whether or not to go to war presidents may well consider only the national interest rather than the war's implications for any more narrow constituency. However, once a war has begun, who will receive the contracts to feed the troops, transport gasoline and other supplies, and ultimately reconstruct the vanquished foe? Here, the door for presidential particularism is wide open. For example, many have alleged that the Bush administration repeatedly awarded federal contracts to key campaign contributors or companies

⁴⁷ Howell and Moe (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ For example, in game theoretic research Daren Acemoglu and James Robinson argue that presidents, because they are elected by a popular vote, "tend to represent the preferences of the median voter in society" (2006, 115). By contrast, Congress must seek to reconcile the diverse preferences of its many members, which undermines its ability to be a truly representative institution. As a result, presidential policies should more closely reflect the will of the national median voter than would those articulated and advanced in Congress.

with other ties to the administration during the reconstruction and occupation of Iraq.⁴⁹

Similarly, Presidents Bush and Obama have championed the virtues of free trade against protectionist impulses in Congress demanding “fair trade” agreements that are contingent on labor and environmental provisions. Bush and Obama acknowledged that free trade agreements would occasionally inflict economic pain on specific industries; yet, they argued that ultimately free trade was in the best interest of the nation as a whole. However, both deviated from this norm when politically expedient. President Bush famously imposed tariffs in 2002 on imported steel to protect mills across the Rust Belt – a case we examine in detail in Chapter 3 – and President Obama followed suit when he raised tariffs in 2009 on foreign tires to defend manufacturers in Ohio and elsewhere. Recent research by economists has shown that while these tariffs may have protected a few American jobs in a handful of electorally valuable constituencies, they came at a significant cost to the overall economy and consumers nationwide.⁵⁰

In a slightly different vein, consider President Obama’s initiative to reinvest in American manufacturing. Clearly, the overall policy was designed to pursue the national interest. With manufacturing experiencing a modest rebound in the aftermath of the great recession, the administration hoped that an infusion of federal dollars might spur additional innovation and job growth and help American manufacturers further expand their market share in a post-financial crash world. The ultimate aim was to help jump-start the economy as a whole. However, it also behooves us to ask who were the specific beneficiaries of this infusion of federal dollars? The first of these manufacturing innovation centers to be announced in 2012 was awarded to Youngstown, Ohio.⁵¹ While we cannot infer motivations from such limited data, this case does remind us that presidents may pursue ultimately universalistic ends through particularistic means.

Why are presidents incentivized to engage in particularism? We contend that the theoretical underpinnings of the universalistic presidency

⁴⁹ Accounts of cronyism and favoritism abound; among others, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran. 2006. *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁵⁰ Charnovitz and Hoekman (2013); Hufbauer and Lowry (2012); Read (2005).

⁵¹ The president mentioned the Youngstown center in his 2014 State of the Union address, along with a second innovation center based in Raleigh, North Carolina, another swing state.

paradigm are problematic. Chapter 2 unpacks our theoretical argument concerning the forces driving presidential particularism in detail. Here, we briefly outline what we consider to be the major weaknesses in the arguments for a universalistic presidency and why we believe presidents instead have strong incentives to pursue particularistic policies, specifically those that disproportionately benefit swing state voters and channel benefits to their co-partisan base.

Are presidents driven by reelection? After all, from the start of their administrations, they already possess an innate institutional capacity to attain power as well as an intense popular expectation to use it. Moreover, they face only a single reelection campaign and a maximum of eight years in office. These factors may combine to weaken the influence of electoral incentives on presidents' behavior in office, compared to those faced by members of Congress.

Yet, it is hard to deny that electoral calculations matter considerably to presidents based on the sheer weight of contemporary experience. Presidential actions from executive orders to liberalize immigration policies to decisions concerning how fast to draw down the war in Afghanistan appear in both their content and timing to be influenced by electoral concerns.⁵² Moreover, Mayhew's fundamental insight for members of Congress – that without first securing their reelection members are unable to pursue the policy and institutional power goals that also motivate them – also holds for presidents. First-term presidents inherently desire a second term to complete and consolidate their initial accomplishments and to strike out in new directions. Moreover, even in their second terms, presidents know that the best way to solidify their legacy and entrench their lasting influence on the course of public policy is to ensure the succession of a co-partisan in the White House. Presidency scholars have never given the electoral incentive as much emphasis as have congressional scholars following in Mayhew's wake. However, presidency scholarship has long acknowledged the need to build electoral coalitions.⁵³

Assuming presidents are motivated by electoral pressures, how do they maximize their and their party's electoral fortunes? The universalistic paradigm argues that presidents embrace policies that maximize the national interest. Pursuing policies based on efficiency, not politics, benefits the most people, which in turn translates into the most votes.

As we argue in greater detail in the next chapter, this view fails to recognize the seeds of presidential particularism that are ingrained within

⁵² See, e.g., Milkis (2013); Nasr (2013).

⁵³ See, e.g., Cohen (2006); Edwards (2000); Seligman and Covington (1989).

the constitutional structures of our electoral system. To foreshadow our argument, all voters are not of equal electoral importance to the president, as most of the scholarship positing presidential universalism either explicitly or implicitly assumes. Rather, the existence of the Electoral College, coupled with the adoption of winner-take-all apportionment of electoral votes in forty-eight states, results in some Americans having greater electoral clout than others.⁵⁴ From an electoral perspective, neither President Obama nor Governor Romney cared much about the average Massachusetts voter in 2012. It was a foregone conclusion that President Obama would capture the Bay State's eleven electoral votes. By contrast, the average voter just up I-93 in New Hampshire was heavily targeted by both camps, because the state was a hotly contested battleground state that, despite having fewer than one-fifth as many people as Massachusetts, potentially could have determined the outcome of the election.⁵⁵

How should a president cater to these swing voters, aside from bombarding them with campaign visits and advertisements? The universalistic presidency paradigm argues that presidents do so by pursuing nationally optimal outcomes. By contrast, we argue and demonstrate empirically in the chapters that follow that voters punish or reward presidents not only for the performance of the government as a whole but also for how their policies affect voters' local geographic constituencies. Thus, voters incentivize presidents to pursue particularistic policies that channel federal dollars disproportionately to key constituencies in swing states.⁵⁶ This is a core logic and expectation of our theory of presidential particularism.

Moreover, while presidents aspire to be leaders of the nation as a whole, they are also undeniably leaders of their political parties. Pundits and scholars alike have argued that presidents have embraced this mantle more strongly than ever before in recent decades, culminating in what Charles Cameron has called the "polarized presidency."⁵⁷ As a partisan

⁵⁴ See, *inter alia*, Edwards (2004).

⁵⁵ Often lost amid the 2000 fiasco in Florida was the fact that if Vice President Gore had carried New Hampshire, he would have won a majority of votes in the Electoral College.

⁵⁶ Prior scholarship has recognized the possibility that presidents will pursue, at least on occasion, policies that are primarily aimed at securing votes for reelection. For example, George Edwards notes that there are exceptions to our common conceptions of the presidency and Congress: "Of course, members of Congress are not, at least not usually, merely parochial and selfish representatives of special interests, with no concern for the general welfare. Moreover, presidential policies may be ill considered or be designed primarily to benefit the president's electoral coalition" (Edwards, 2000, 67).

⁵⁷ Bond and Fleisher (2000); Cameron (2000); Galvin (2009); Milkis and Rhodes (2007); Skinner (2008).

leader, a president has strong incentives to pursue policies that maximize outcomes for the core partisan constituency, not policies that maximize outputs for the nation as a whole.⁵⁸ Thus, partisan forces, which are particularly strong in our contemporary, ideologically polarized, and hyper-partisan environment, may also compel presidents to pursue aggressively particularistic policies.⁵⁹

1.4 When Goals Collide

At least since Paul Light, presidential scholars have acknowledged that presidents pursue multiple goals when seeking to put their stamp on public policy.⁶⁰ As the universalistic framework emphasizes, presidents are concerned with power, legacy, and securing policy outcomes that benefit the nation as a whole. However, to achieve any of their goals, presidents must first build and sustain an electoral coalition. Once in office, presidents rely heavily on their partisan base for support in the public and in the legislature. This creates strong incentives for presidents to pursue policies that will solidify and grow their partisan base. In some instances, these goals may be complementary. But in many others, they will necessarily be in conflict. When this happens, which goals and incentives have the greatest influence on presidential behavior?⁶¹

When seeking to allocate finite federal resources, particularly in an era of growing scarcity, will the president primarily seek maximum efficiency increasing the overall utility of the nation? Or will he strive to target such resources strategically, concentrating benefits in key swing states

⁵⁸ Wood (2009).

⁵⁹ On polarization more generally, see McCarty et al. (2006).

⁶⁰ Light (1998 [1982]).

⁶¹ We are not the first to note this tension and speculate about its consequences for policy-making. For example, Jeffrey Cohen (2006, 541) emphasizes the competing directions in which presidents are sometimes pulled: "For instance, on the one hand the president is a symbol, representative, and leader of the entire nation. But the president is also a partisan who seeks benefits for some sectors of the polity, such as his party and those who voted for him. Presidents seek these particularized group-specific benefits as they try to build coalitions in support of their electoral and policy goals." Similarly, Sidney Milkis, Jesse Rhodes, and Emily Charnock (2012, 59) describe Barack Obama as "an ambitious politician caught between the conflicting institutional and electoral imperatives of contemporary party politics." We build on this prior research; develop precise hypotheses about how such concerns will manifest themselves in policy outcomes; and marshal an array of data, both quantitative and qualitative, across multiple policy venues to provide the most comprehensive assessment yet of the relative influence of universalistic and particularistic impulses on presidential policymaking.

and districts or channeling as many benefits as possible to core partisan constituencies?

In arguing that presidents are routinely driven to engage in their own form of particularism, we still acknowledge important and fundamental differences in the policy outlooks and priorities of presidents and members of Congress. To be sure, congressional scholarship from Mayhew onward emphasizing the importance of the electoral connection and catering to the needs of specific constituencies undoubtedly characterizes a great deal of congressional behavior. Similarly, presidents undeniably have a national constituency. The power they wield in Washington and ultimately their lasting historical legacies depend in large part on national policy outcomes; their continuance in office depends to a considerable degree on national conditions and political forces. Using Howell and colleagues' framework, we acknowledge that presidents and members of Congress may routinely differ on the relative importance they attach to the national and local consequences of governmental policy. Yet, existing scholarship arguing that presidents almost exclusively care about the national consequences of policy choices misses the strong electoral and partisan incentives they have to pursue policies that cater to the needs of politically valuable constituencies. The universalistic perspective risks blinding us to the potential adverse consequences of the erosion of checks and balances and the ascendance of presidential power that has occurred in recent decades by falsely assuring Americans that presidents pursue policies that maximize the national interest.

The material costs of presidential particularism are sizable. As we show in analyses throughout the book, a single county may lose out on tens of millions of dollars by virtue of whether it is located in an uncompetitive rather than a swing state, or whether it reliably backed the opposition party as opposed to the president. While we offer new theoretical insights into the political behavior of presidents, we also describe a phenomenon with real-world consequences. Particularistic impulses drive presidents to influence substantially the allocation of federal benefits across the country as a whole, to the tune of billions of dollars each year. And further delegation to the White House, which many analysts have proposed as a solution to our current institutional malaise, is likely to exacerbate these trends.

1.5 Road Map

In the next chapter, we lay out in detail our theory of the forces driving presidential particularism. We begin by arguing that the universalistic

framework fundamentally misconstrues the nature of the electoral incentives that presidents face. Rather, the Electoral College dictates that some voters are more important to the president than are others. Moreover, voters reward or punish presidents at the polls not only for national policy performance but also for how federal policies have affected their local communities. These factors combine to give presidents strong incentives to target federal dollars to voters in battleground states. However, presidents also possess incentives to engage in other forms of particularism. Presidents are partisan leaders with strong incentives to pursue policies that reward their core partisan base. Presidents may also strategically use their influence over the budget to reward co-partisan members of Congress in an effort to build political capital for future initiatives. The chapter concludes with a precise set of hypotheses that guide our analysis of presidential particularism that follows.

We begin by looking for evidence of presidential particularism in a range of policy areas, including several where we might least expect it. In Chapter 3, we find strong evidence of electoral particularism in trade policy. Seeking to insulate trade policy from parochial impulses, Congress has delegated considerable authority to the president to decide whether to employ protectionist measures to assist domestic industries hurt by unfair foreign competition. While presidents since Franklin Roosevelt have advanced free trade in the aggregate, they have routinely deviated from their overarching principles to defend the interests of industries concentrated in electorally critical parts of the country. Within the context of closing obsolete and redundant military bases, we show that the commander-in-chief has repeatedly acted as partisan-in-chief. When given the opportunity, presidents have sought to protect bases in core co-partisan constituencies and concentrate the economic pain of closures in parts of the country that reliably back the partisan opposition.

In Chapter 4 we present startling evidence of electoral and partisan particularism in presidential natural disaster declarations. Even after controlling for actual disaster damage and objective economic need, we find that presidents disproportionately award disaster aid to parts of the country that are key to their electoral prospects or that are part of their core partisan base. We also find strong evidence of presidential targeting in a policy venue long held to be dominated not by the president but by Congress: the allocation of federal transportation dollars across the country.

We then cast a broader net and look for evidence of presidential particularism in federal spending writ large. Chapter 5 begins by describing the mechanisms through which presidents can influence budgetary outcomes.

Although Congress has the power of the purse, as head of the bureaucracy presidents possess a number of levers through which they can shape how federal dollars are geographically distributed. We then examine the allocation of more than \$8 trillion in federal grant spending across the country from 1984 through 2008. In sharp contrast to the norms of universalism, we find strong evidence that presidents systematically target federal grant dollars both to battleground states and to core partisan constituencies. Swing state targeting varies with the electoral calendar, while core constituency targeting is a persistent force in presidential policymaking. We also test arguments about where presidents should target dollars within swing states to reap the maximum electoral advantage. Surprisingly, our data suggests that the inequalities that arise through presidential particularism may dwarf those produced by parochial impulses within Congress.

The analysis concludes by shifting focus to voters and how they respond to targeted spending in their local communities. Chapter 6 tests one of the core assumptions underlying our theory of electoral particularism: that voters reward or punish presidents at the polls for the share of federal spending their local communities receive. Past scholarship has almost exclusively focused on the effects of federal spending on congressional outcomes to surprisingly little effect. We argue that earlier studies have largely looked in the wrong place for evidence of an electoral linkage between local spending and electoral outcomes. In our increasingly presidentialized political system, voters logically hold presidents accountable for a full panoply of policy outcomes, including the distribution of federal spending. Marshaling election data from more than two decades, we show that presidents reap significant rewards at the ballot box in counties that experienced an infusion of election-year federal grant spending. We supplement this observational evidence from electoral returns with an original survey experiment showing conclusively that voters do indeed reward the president for federal spending in their local communities.

To conclude, Chapter 7 reflects on the broader consequences of presidential particularism for our polity. As citizens, we overlook the consequences of presidential particularism at our own peril. Political scientists, economists, legal scholars, and average Americans alike risk fundamentally misunderstanding policy processes if they assume that presidents act as a counterbalance to the particularistic impulses of members of the legislative branch. The danger of this misunderstanding is compounded by the ever-growing powers of the American presidency. If presidents pursue the national interest, then rising presidential power at the expense of Congress may – apologies to Madison – paradoxically serve the public

interest. However, if growing presidential power leads to the replacement of one form of particularism with another, the erosion of our system of checks and balances is unlikely to yield any benefits in terms of policy outcomes, and instead may come at a significant cost for democratic governance.

The Origins of Presidential Particularism

The political scientist Harold Lasswell famously defined *politics* as who gets what, when, and how. On these questions, the universalistic presidency framework and the vision of a particularistic presidency that we offer in its place yield starkly diverging expectations. When making major policy decisions and deciding how to allocate federal resources across the country, do presidents prioritize the needs and desires of some constituencies over others? The universalistic presidency framework argues no. Presidents, alone in our system, possess a truly national constituency. As such, they are uniquely positioned to pursue nationally optimal policy outcomes. Unlike members of Congress, they know that their lasting legacy will be measured by how they served the national interest, not how they balanced such imperatives with the need to serve a more narrow geographic constituency.

We do not dispute that presidents are motivated by an intense desire to champion and implement policies that benefit the nation as a whole. However, we argue that presidents also have strong incentives to be particularistic – that is, to weigh the needs and desires of some Americans more heavily than others when forming their policy priorities. The incentives driving particularistic behaviors are multiple. For example, electoral motivations drive presidents to respond disproportionately to the interests of voters in constituencies with the most clout in the next presidential contest. Moreover, presidents are more than reelection seekers; they are also partisan leaders. As such, presidents routinely prioritize the needs of their partisan base over those of constituencies that reliably back the partisan opposition. As party leaders, presidents reliably move to

channel federal benefits to constituencies that send co-partisan legislators to Washington.

The differences between the universalistic and particularistic paradigms are not merely theoretical or semantic. Rather, they have serious, tangible consequences for public policymaking in America. Left to their own devices, presidents do not simply pursue policies that maximize benefits for the entire nation. Rather, strong particularistic forces compel them to pursue policies that produce significant inequalities in federal policy that benefit constituencies of greater political importance to the president at the expense of others.

2.1 Electoral Particularism

Virtually all analysts of the presidency from the founding through to the modern day begin by emphasizing that the president is the only officeholder in our political system elected by the nation as a whole.¹ In 2012, the president's constituency numbered almost 241 million voters.² No elected office in the United States, or the world for that matter, has as many constituents.³ But the fact that the presidential constituency is orders of magnitude larger than that of any member of the House or Senate does not in and of itself imply that presidents care only about national policy outcomes. Rather, the key question is what policy outcomes presidents should pursue to maximize their prospects of winning elections? Whether presidents should embrace particularistic policies to maximize their vote share depends on how voters make choices in presidential elections. For what outcomes do voters hold presidents accountable at the ballot box?

Election postmortems produce a dizzying array of factors that are alleged to have tilted the balance of victory from one candidate to the other. Many journalistic accounts focus on the personalities of the principals, single events, or the strategic decisions made by campaigns. Following President Obama's reelection in 2012, for example, pundits proffered

¹ The vice president is also elected by the nation as a whole but as the less prominent partner on the president's ticket.

² http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.

³ The next largest single constituency belongs to the Indonesian president. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the voting aged population in the 2014 Indonesian presidential election numbered 168 million, about 70% of the American voting aged population in 2012. However, more voters turned out to vote for the Indonesian president in 2014 than the American president in 2012.

a host of explanations for Obama's victory ranging from Governor Romney's verbal gaffes – the infamous 47 percent critique and his “binders full of women” debate slip – to the Obama campaign's decision to advertise early and often on sitcoms popular among young women.⁴ The ebb and flow of campaign momentum provides for dramatic political theater, and it offers steady employment for a host of modern day TV augurs who inspect daily the latest presidential tracking polls for evidence of each factor's impact on the horse race. However, as Andrew Gelman and Gary King noted two decades ago, a great puzzle of American elections is that, despite the considerable volatility in public opinion polls during the course of the campaign, American presidential election outcomes are often quite predictable in the aggregate.⁵

Among most scholars and many commentators, national factors, especially the state of the national economy, matter most. For many election cycles, political scientists have created forecast models that use only a few variables to predict with considerable accuracy the final vote share of the incumbent presidential party, usually before the general election campaigns even begin. At the core of virtually every one of these models is some measure of national economic performance.⁶ The change in real disposable income, the index of consumer sentiment, growth in the gross domestic product: each scholar tweaks the specifics of his or her model, but the emphasis on the state of the national economy is constant. Armed only with a few key economic variables and usually some measure of public support for the incumbent president – itself a quantity highly influenced by economic assessments – scholars can predict with considerable accuracy how well the incumbent party will fare at the polls.⁷

Other scholarship emphasizes the power national forces and assessments have on individual voting decisions. Forecast models show that national economic indicators often yield accurate predictions of presidential vote share in the aggregate, presumably because voters hold presidents accountable for national economic outcomes. This is supported by a long tradition of scholarship emphasizing the importance of “sociotropic”

⁴ Scott Wilson and Philip Rucker, “The strategy that paved a winning path,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/the-strategy-that-paved-a-winning-path/2012/11/07/oa1201c8-2769-11e2-b2ao-ae18d6159439_story.html.

⁵ Gelman and King (1993).

⁶ See, e.g., Abramowitz (2008); Erikson (1989); Lewis-Beck and Tien (2008).

⁷ See, e.g., Clarke and Stewart (1994); Erikson et al. (2000); MacKuen et al. (1992); Norpoth (1985).

voting among individuals: studies of how individual voters make up their minds have consistently shown that how voters view the health of the national economy is among the most important determinants of their vote choices.⁸ To be sure, there are differences in emphasis. Some scholarship argues that voters are primarily retrospective; they cast the proverbial finger to the wind and reward incumbents for strong economic performance and punish those who preside over sluggish economic conditions.⁹ Others contend that voters are more sophisticated and make prospective assessments of how well the economy is poised to perform in the near future.¹⁰ Regardless of the relative weight voters give to retrospective and prospective assessments, the most important consequence for presidents is that assessments of the health of the national economy are paramount on voters' minds as they head to the polls.¹¹

If this view is correct, and if voters hold presidents accountable only for the state of the nation as a whole, then presidents have scant electoral incentive to weigh the needs and interests of some voters more heavily than those of others. Because the president serves a national constituency, the utility of one voter or group of voters is of equal value to the president

⁸ The importance of national economic assessments or "sociotropic" concerns, as they are often called in the political science literature, may surprise some, particularly given the widespread lack of political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) and heavy reliance on simple heuristics (Popkin, 1994) that characterize the median voter. However, Diana Mutz argues that the mass media play a key role in encouraging such behavior (Mutz, 1992). By repeatedly emphasizing national economic conditions in its election coverage, the media produce a sociotropic priming effect through which they encourage voters to evaluate candidates in terms of the performance of the national economy.

⁹ Alesina et al. (1993); Bartels (2008); Fiorina (1981); Key (1966).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Erikson et al. (2000); Suzuki and Chappell (1996).

¹¹ See, e.g., Kinder and Kiewiet (1981). Some scholars have challenged this emphasis on national conditions, arguing that voters rely more on pocketbook considerations when voting in presidential contests. Instead, this school of thought argues that voters reward or punish incumbent presidents based on whether their personal economic fortunes have risen or sunk during the incumbent's term in office. While there is modest evidence of pocketbook voting, the bulk of the data strongly supports the preeminence of national economic conditions in voters' decision calculus (Kiewiet, 1983; Kinder et al., 1989; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981; Lanoue, 1994; Markus, 1992); though see Kramer (1983). For example, in 1992 the Clinton-Gore campaign famously ran on the slogan, "It's the Economy, Stupid!" (a slogan that Mitt Romney reprised two decades later in 2012). But which economy mattered? In an analysis of voter decision making in 1992, Alvarez and Nagler (1995) present convincing evidence that voters gave only scant weight to their own employment prospects and financial situation when deciding whether to vote to reelect President Bush or to support Clinton or the third-party candidate, H. Ross Perot. Instead, voters' assessments of the overall economic climate in the country dominated their electoral choices.

as that of any other voter. Therefore, to compete for the greatest number of votes, presidents should pursue policies that maximize outputs for the greatest number of people.

Moreover, even if Americans in some parts of the country had disproportionate influence on the election, because voters evaluate presidents and their policies primarily on national and not local or personal terms, presidents should pursue policies that benefit the economy and country as a whole, rather than cater to the needs of specific constituencies. Whereas members of Congress may logically seek to channel as many dollars as possible to their own narrow constituencies, because voters are held to evaluate presidents primarily based on national outcomes, presidents do not have electoral incentives to target budgetary resources inefficiently. Instead, serendipitously, presidents are incentivized to pursue policies that maximize national outcomes and eschew the parochial concerns of a privileged few.

As a result, the universalistic presidency framework predicts that measures of a constituency's electoral importance to the president and his party will not be associated with the share of federal benefits that it receives. Under the universalistic framework, there is no reason to expect presidents to target funds toward some constituencies and away from others for electoral reasons.

We argue that this perspective fundamentally misconstrues the nature of the electoral incentives that presidents face. In sharp contrast to a foundational assumption of the universalistic framework, we contend that voters hold presidents accountable for *local* as well as national outcomes.

2.1.1 All Politics Is Local

To adapt former House Speaker Tip O'Neill's famous aphorism, all politics – even presidential politics – is, at least in part, local. To ignore the local dimension of presidential electoral politics is to risk making false assumptions about the forces motivating presidential behavior. Most prior researchers have downplayed the importance of local forces in presidential elections. The relative weight that voters place on national versus local concerns will vary across individuals and over time. However, a growing number of studies suggest that the local consequences of federal policies have significant and consistent influence on presidential elections.

Why do local conditions and experiences influence voters' decisions for a national office? First, policies made in Washington have consequences for both the nation as a whole and the communities in which voters live.

As a result, voters may logically hold presidents accountable for both national and local policy outcomes. Second, local conditions and policy outcomes may be particularly salient because most Americans are not instinctively attuned to national conditions. Rather, they see the world and the effects of government policies largely through the lens of their local communities. Particularly when trying to assess the president's policies and whether they have been good or bad for the nation, the local impacts of these policies may be more readily available and accessible for many Americans. When evaluating a president, voters may care more about whether the local steel mill was protected from foreign competition, flood victims down county received federal disaster assistance, or the military base on which the local economy heavily depends escaped the latest round of base closings than about conditions in the nation as a whole. Consequently, voters rationally use this localized information as a heuristic when evaluating the president's job performance.¹²

On most issues, even issues of major national import, the public as a whole is surprisingly uninformed. For example, research has shown that the public knows very little about objective economic conditions in the country as a whole¹³ or the total number of casualties suffered in a foreign war.¹⁴ This holds even for highly salient metrics on which we judge government performance. Consider public views about the unemployment rate, perhaps the most frequently reported and readily interpretable national economic indicator. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment peaked at 10.0 percent in October 2009. As late as the close of 2010, it sat at 9.4 percent, and then it declined steadily throughout 2011, reaching 8.3 percent by February 2012. That month, the Pew Research Center asked a representative sample of Americans: "In recent months, has the national unemployment rate been increasing or decreasing?" Only 58 percent correctly said that unemployment was falling, a figure not that much higher than what should have been produced by random guessing. A full 32 percent of respondents thought that unemployment was increasing.¹⁵

For a number of reasons, these discrepancies are not all that surprising. Average Americans do not directly experience the national gross

¹² For example, Cohen (2006) shows that state unemployment rates are a strong and statistically significant predictor of state-level presidential approval ratings.

¹³ Conover et al. (1986, 1987).

¹⁴ Berinsky (2007).

¹⁵ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Political Survey, February 8–12, 2012, USPSRA.021612.R3.

domestic product or the national unemployment rate. National statistics can be ominously portrayed in the mass media, but for millions they may have little relationship to the conditions that voters observe in their daily lives.¹⁶

Whereas national policy outcomes can be removed from everyday experience, the localized consequences of these policies are more directly integrated into daily life. Moreover, personal experiences with the localized consequences of federal policies are supplemented through conversations with family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors; the information about governmental performance in general and presidential stewardship of the country in particular gleaned through interpersonal networks tends to be heavily influenced by the local climate in which these networks are embedded.

Information about the local consequences of federal policies is also made more readily available by local media outlets, on which many Americans continue to rely for the bulk of their political information.¹⁷ Local media sources pay more attention to federal policies, from taxes and spending priorities to foreign wars, when their effects hit close to home. Physical closeness is a critically important news value.¹⁸ Consider, for example, local news coverage of federal stimulus spending. To the extent that local media covered various efforts by the Obama administration to prime the pump with federal dollars in the aggregate, local papers and TV broadcasts, like larger, more national outlets, often emphasized bickering and ugly politicking in Washington, including rampant charges that taxpayer dollars were being wasted. However, federal stimulus projects that affected local communities most often received significant and favorable coverage.

In Chapter 1, we briefly discussed the Obama administration's efforts to channel as many federal dollars as possible to support a wide array of projects in the key swing state of Ohio. Local media outlets matched

¹⁶ For example, in early 2012, the unemployment rate in Virginia sat at 5.6 percent, whereas in California it was almost twice as high at 11.0 percent. Voters in the former experienced a labor market significantly better than the country as a whole, while those in the latter faced even bleaker employment prospects than the average American. Given such disparities, it would be surprising if the average Virginian did not judge President Obama's economic stewardship differently than the average Californian, all else being equal.

¹⁷ Gilliam, Jr. and Iyengar (2000).

¹⁸ Among others, see Behr and Iyengar (1985); Goidel and Langley (1995); Harrington (1989); Molotch and Lester (1974); Shoemaker and Reese (1996); Wilkins and Patterson (1987).

the deluge of dollars from Washington with story after story detailing the federal projects undertaken in the state and how they might translate into jobs. Large grants, such as a federal award for an airport runway extension in Toledo, received considerable attention in large city newspapers.¹⁹ But even smaller grants received significant attention from local newspaper outlets.²⁰ For example, under the headline “Federal grant may restore jobs,” *The Middletown Journal* in March 2012 heralded a federal firefighter staffing grant that would allow the town to rehire five laid-off workers and to hire an additional firefighter for the local station.²¹ Even when jobs were not at the forefront, local coverage emphasized the direct effect of federal grant programs on the quality of life in local communities. For example, an article in *The Lima News* proclaimed that “the effort to help Allen County residents live healthier lives got a little easier, thanks in part to a \$1.2 million federal grant to Activate Allen County, community leaders said this morning.”²²

Thus, local reporting encourages retrospective Americans to evaluate presidents not just in terms of national conditions and policy outcomes but also in terms of the state of affairs in their local communities and whether presidential policies have brought additional benefits or imposed costs on the places where voters live and work. Indeed, a wave of recent research from varying perspectives has found evidence that local conditions and the localized consequences of federal policies affect voters’ electoral calculus in presidential contests. For example, recent studies argue that local economic conditions exert substantial influence on presidential vote choice. Local unemployment, income growth, and even factors such as local fuel prices and foreclosure rates all have been shown to be influential in presidential elections.²³

In a different policy venue, other scholars have shown that even major wars – seemingly the most national of all public policies – can also have

¹⁹ David Patch, “Toledo Express wins \$5.7 million runway grant,” *The Blade*, August 29, 2012.

²⁰ Examining the credit that members of Congress receive for local spending, Grimmer et al. (2012), in an experimental context, find that politicians are rewarded based on the number of awards, not on the amount of the reward.

²¹ Michael Pitman, “Federal Grant May Restore Jobs,” *The Middletown Journal*, March 4, 2012.

²² Bob Blake, “Activate Allen County nets \$1.2 million federal grant,” *The Lima News*, September 26, 2012.

²³ See, e.g. Abrams and Butkiewicz (1995); Books and Prysby (1999); Reeves and Gimpel (2012); Snowberg et al. (2014).

significant localized electoral consequences.²⁴ None of America's wars since World War II have required mass mobilization of society on a war footing; as a result, those fighting and dying in America's wars from Korea through Afghanistan have not hailed equally from all parts of the country.²⁵ Americans from communities that suffer high casualty rates "see" the costs of war in much sharper relief than do residents of low-casualty communities, which are relatively more insulated from the human toll of the nation's military policies. Those who see the localized costs of war disproportionately punish the incumbent president or his partisan successor at the ballot box.²⁶

To some observers, the importance that voters attach to local conditions and policy consequences in presidential contests may be surprising. After all, these are commonly thought to be the stuff of congressional, not presidential, elections. However, it bears emphasizing that politics at all levels is increasingly centered around the president. More than forty years ago, Richard Neustadt warned that demands for presidential action from all corners far outstripped presidential capacity to meet them. In Neustadt's memorable phrase, "Everybody now expects the man in the White House to do something about everything."²⁷ If anything, the popular expectations under which presidents labor have only increased since Neustadt wrote. On virtually every issue, of grand or trivial import, the public looks to the president for leadership and solutions. Emphasizing the irrelevant, research by Andrew Healy, Neil Malhotra, and Cecilia Mo finds that support for the president increases after local college football and basketball game victories.²⁸ Likewise, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels document the strange case of President Woodrow Wilson being punished for shark attacks off the southern coast of New Jersey in his 1916 bid for reelection.²⁹ While these are extreme cases, they underline a wider point: voters routinely hold presidents accountable for localized outcomes, even if they are beyond the president's control.

Just as important, presidential campaigns *believe* that voters in key constituencies make their decisions based in large part on local factors. For example, Bush administration officials publicly stated that they

²⁴ Kriner and Shen (2014).

²⁵ Kriner and Shen (2010).

²⁶ Karol and Miguel (2007); Kriner and Reeves (2012).

²⁷ Neustadt (1990 [1960], 7).

²⁸ Healy et al. (2010).

²⁹ Achen and Bartels (2004).

believed their victory in West Virginia in 2000 – which was pivotal in securing the presidency – was in large part the result of voters punishing Vice President Al Gore for the Clinton administration's failure to defend domestic steel from foreign competition.³⁰ President Obama made his support for the auto bailouts a centerpiece of his efforts to win Ohio in 2012. Governor Romney tried to turn the tables by launching a series of ads alleging that GM and Jeep were shipping Midwestern jobs overseas. However, David Plouffe, the president's campaign guru, argued that the Romney gambit would only backfire by reminding voters of the extraordinary efforts Obama took to rescue the industry and save jobs in the Buckeye State – see discussion above.³¹ Similarly, Obama campaign officials expressed confidence that low unemployment in Virginia (5.9 percent versus just under 8.0 percent in the nation as a whole) would buoy the president's chances there, while the Romney campaign hoped that the looming specter of sequestration, which threatened massive layoffs of federal employees living in Virginia, would open the door for a Romney victory.³²

Perceiving that they are held responsible for many local phenomena, presidents have responded in kind. In his aptly titled book *Going Local*, Jeffrey Cohen shows that presidents have adapted to major changes in the media environment by increasingly geographically targeting their public appeals.³³ As national presidential appeals have gradually lost their influence with the demise of large national audiences and the Golden Era of Presidential Television dominated by the Big Three networks, presidents have increasingly targeted their appeal to specific localities, emphasizing the connection of their initiatives to local conditions and endeavoring to dominate local news coverage.³⁴ In this way, presidents have further encouraged voters to hold them responsible for localized policy outcomes. Yet, we argue these incentives have done more than change the way presidents communicate with and seek to mobilize voters. They have also

³⁰ "Behind the steel-tariff curtain," *Businessweek*, March 7, 2002. <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2002-03-07/behind-the-steel-tariff-curtain>.

³¹ Gabriella Schwarz, "Axelrod: Obama closing argument 'from his loins,'" *CNN Political Ticker*. <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/11/02/axelrod-obama-closing-argument-from-his-loins/>.

³² Elizabeth Hartfield, "Battleground: Will Virginia stay with Obama?" *ABC News*, October 30, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/virginia-swing-voters/story?id=17589979>.

³³ Cohen (2010).

³⁴ Baum and Kernell (1999).

encouraged presidents to craft policy initiatives that respond specifically to the needs of local communities.

2.1.2 *The Electoral College and Political Equality*

We argue that voters hold presidents accountable for local policy outcomes. However, this does not imply that presidents should deviate from the expectations of universalism. If all voters have equal weight in selecting the next president, then the best strategy for securing the most votes is to benefit the greatest number of people. This would dictate a budgetary strategy that seeks to maximize only economic efficiency; the political characteristics of a state or county should have no influence on the share of federal dollars it receives. But as even casual observers of American presidential elections know, this is not the case. Presidential elections are governed by the Electoral College, which distinguishes the presidential election contest from a popular vote in two important respects.

First, the Constitution specifies that each state receives the number of electors “equal to the whole number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress.” Therefore, the malapportionment present in the U.S. Senate is also enshrined in the Electoral College. As a result, residents of less populous states, such as Delaware or Wyoming, enjoy more representation in the Electoral College than do residents of large states, such as California or Texas.

Second, despite its affront to “one man, one vote,” malapportionment of electors is less influential than how states allocate their electoral votes to the winner. The Constitution grants to each state the prerogative to determine how to award its electors. In the early nineteenth century, many states allocated their electors on a district basis, awarding electors to the candidate who carried the popular vote in a specified region of the state. However, this began to change with the advent of Jacksonian Democracy, and since 1832 only three states have deviated from the new norm of winner-take-all allocation; that is, the candidate who wins a plurality of votes in a state receives all of its electoral votes. Today, only Maine and Nebraska follow a version of the district plan.³⁵

The almost universal adoption of winner-take-all allocation means that many states are firmly in the camp of one political party or the other. For instance, even though the share of the two-party vote earned by the Republican presidential candidate in Texas has ranged from 53 percent

³⁵ For historical overviews of the Electoral College, see Berdahl (1949); Dougherty (1906); Edwards (2004).

to 62 percent since 1996, there is little chance that the Republican will lose the state. Although the level of support for the Republican candidate may shift substantially, there is virtually no chance that it will fall below that of the Democratic nominee. The result is that voters in Texas and other such states are taken for granted by the favored party's candidate and systematically ignored by the other party's candidate. Swing state voters plainly wield more political clout than citizens of electorally uncompetitive states.

Critics of the Electoral College have long noted the many unintended consequences that have arisen from its design. Perhaps one of the most oft-cited and immediately obvious consequences is that presidential candidates concentrate the bulk of their time, advertising dollars, and resources reaching out to and seeking to persuade voters in swing states at the expense of voters residing in other parts of the country.³⁶ For instance, in 2004, California saw neither George W. Bush nor John Kerry make a campaign appearance between early September and Election Day.³⁷ President Barack Obama himself put it best while on the reelection trail in October 2012. The president began the day in New Hampshire, a small but critically important swing state that, with the election only four weeks away, many pundits still labeled a toss-up. After a campaign event in Manchester, Obama headed to Manhattan for the Al Smith dinner at Manhattan's glitzy Waldorf Astoria Hotel in the non-battleground state of New York.³⁸ In addition to offering presidential candidates the opportunity to hob-knob with top Catholic leaders, the Al Smith dinner traditionally gives candidates the chance to show off their comedic credentials. Following this protocol, after Governor Romney gave his address to the assembly, the president rose and led off with a joke: "In less than three weeks, voters in states like Ohio, Virginia, and Florida will decide this incredibly important election, which begs the question, what are we doing here?"³⁹ The audience roared its approval with a hearty laugh. But beneath the chuckles, the joke reminded listeners of a fundamental truth about our electoral system: because of its institutional

³⁶ Among others, see Banzhaff (1968); Bartels (1985); Brams and Davis (1974); Nagler and Leighley (1992).

³⁷ Shaw (2006, table 4.3).

³⁸ For the president's schedule that day, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/schedule/president/2012-10-18>.

³⁹ Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner in New York City," October 18, 2012. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=102391>.

structure, presidential candidates are all but compelled to value and vie for the votes of some Americans more than others.

If all the Electoral College and winner-take-all apportionment did was to encourage presidential candidates to spend the bulk of their time and campaign dollars in swing states or even to focus on the issues and concerns of swing state voters, perhaps the ramifications for American democracy would be modest. However, because voters hold presidents accountable for local phenomena, presidents have strong incentives to pursue policies that advance the interests of swing states in the hopes of maximizing their and their co-partisan successors' chances at winning the next election.⁴⁰ Voters reward presidents for increased federal largesse in their local communities and punish them for failing to be responsive to their needs.⁴¹ Thus, presidents should pursue policies that allocate federal dollars disproportionately to swing states with the most electoral leverage.

We readily acknowledge that the universalistic and particularistic conceptions of the presidency are not mutually exclusive. The president is undoubtedly a universalistic actor concerned about the national welfare. However, the structure of our electoral system coupled with voters holding presidents accountable for local policy outcomes combine to incentivize the president to trade an efficient pursuit of the national good for policies that disproportionately benefit electorally important constituents. Through this mechanism, political inequality in presidential elections is translated into inequality in concrete policy outcomes.

2.2 Partisan Particularism

While presidents are representatives of the American people as a whole, they are also the leaders of their political party. Scholars have long recognized that presidents of different political parties enter office with different agendas and competing ideological visions concerning the types of

⁴⁰ See also Hudak (2014).

⁴¹ Not all voters will reward presidents for increased spending in their local communities equally – and some may not even reward the president at all. For example, the demand for federal benefits, even for benefits specifically targeted to voters' local communities, may vary by ideology, with liberals rewarding presidents more than conservatives do (Lazarus and Reilly, 2010). Indeed, we have explored some of this variation in our earlier research (Kriner and Reeves, 2012). While understanding this variation is undoubtedly important, the central implication of this alternative vision of American electoral behavior is that geographic targeting of federal grants stands to benefit the president and his party at the polls within the targeted constituencies.

policies that best serve the national interest. However, much of the research in the universalistic framework fails to consider the extent to which partisan imperatives cause presidents to prioritize the needs of some members of their national constituency over those of others.

In *The Myth of Presidential Representation*, B. Dan Wood challenges the idea that presidents respond to centrist opinion and instead argues that presidents are first and foremost partisan leaders responsive to the needs and wants of the constituency that put them in office. “Having achieved electoral success,” Wood argues, “presidents are anxious to pursue their most favored policies and reward core supporters with benefits that accrue from election outcomes.”⁴² In a similar vein, Daniel Galvin’s *Presidential Party Building* emphasizes the important role that many modern presidents, particularly Republicans, have played in building their party’s resources and enhancing its electoral competitiveness. The ever-increasing polarization of our political system in recent decades has only exacerbated matters, with some scholars decrying the emergence of a “partisan presidency.”⁴³ The hallmark of this new vision of presidential leadership, according to Sidney Milkis and colleagues, is “an emergent style of partisan presidential leadership featuring vigorous efforts to accomplish party objectives.”⁴⁴

This scholarship reminds us that presidents are both national leaders and partisan leaders. The latter role motivates another form of presidential particularism: presidents may be more responsive to the needs of their core partisan base than to those of less reliable partisan voters. As a result, rather than targeting federal benefits only in swing states, constituencies that are highly populated with presidential co-partisans – which we label *core states* – might also reap disproportionate shares of federal largesse.

Presidents could pursue policies that disproportionately reward core states for several reasons. First, presidents could target core states for electoral purposes. Risk-averse presidents may be wise to take nothing for granted. A state may be “core” today but gone tomorrow. For example, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Indiana was a solidly Republican state; yet, in 2008, Indiana voters sent shock waves through the political system by narrowly voting for Barack Obama over John McCain. Pursuing policies that channel federal resources to core states

⁴² Wood (2009, 36).

⁴³ See Cameron (2002); Cohen et al. (2008); Galvin (2013); Milkis and Rhodes (2007); Newman and Siegle (2010); Skinner (2008).

⁴⁴ Milkis et al. (2012, 58).

may serve an important role in shoring up the party's electoral foundation. However, such a strategy comes at a cost, as resources that are spent in core constituencies are then unavailable to help bolster a president's cause in swing states, the most electorally valuable constituencies.

Second, as Dan Wood has argued, presidents may face strong incentives to reward their partisan base. As partisans-in-chief, presidents may pursue policies consciously designed to channel benefits disproportionately to core partisan constituencies. For example, Democratic presidents owe their election in significant part to strong levels of support in many of the nation's cities. By championing large expansions of federal housing, community development, and other grant programs that overwhelmingly benefit urban communities, Democratic presidents can reward a key component of their party base. By contrast, Republican presidents may pursue an expanded program of agricultural grants, the benefits of which will accrue disproportionately to rural areas that tend to be bastions of Republicanism. Geographic targeting is not the conscious aim – rather, benefiting specific groups is – but it is the end result of pursuing such priorities.⁴⁵

Third, it is possible that core state targeting – the concentration of federal policy benefits in parts of the country that solidly back the president and his party – could be an unintended though no less tangible result of presidents of different parties possessing different ideas of how best to serve the needs of the nation and pursuing different programmatic agendas accordingly. In this framework, Democratic presidents may pursue mass transit and expanded welfare programs not to reward co-partisan voters but because they believe such policies best serve the needs of the nation. Republican presidents, by contrast, may believe that the national interest is better served through other projects, like agricultural subsidies or additional defense spending, which tend to concentrate benefits in Republican-leaning districts. Thus, presidents may pursue universalistic ends through particularistic means.

In many policy venues, discerning between the partisan reward and competing visions of the national interest hypotheses is exceedingly difficult because they both yield the same observable prediction: core

⁴⁵ This logic is consistent with the Congress-centric literature on federal spending, which argues that the distribution of federal spending across the country varies significantly depending on whether Democrats or Republicans control Congress because the two parties pursue different programmatic agendas and priorities. See, *inter alia*, Albouy (2013); Stein and Bickers (1995).

partisan constituencies receiving a disproportionate share of federal benefits. Consider tax policy. Few would be surprised if a Democratic president championed increased tax rates on the rich and an expansion of the earned income tax credit to assist the working poor. By contrast, most Republican presidents reliably support reduction in tax rates, particularly at the top end of the distribution, and other policies such as reduced capital gains tax rates and the elimination of the estate tax that disproportionately benefit the wealthy. If enacted, such policies concentrate their benefits on each party's core constituency. The poor, even in red states, overwhelmingly vote Democratic, while the rich, particularly in the red states, solidly back Republicans.⁴⁶ The resulting inequality in the allocation of policy benefits along political lines is partisan particularism. However, in this case geographic targeting to core constituencies may not be the primary aim. Rather, Democratic presidents believe that a tax code benefiting the poor best serves the national interest, particularly in an age of stark income inequality, while Republican presidents believe that lessening the tax burden on the wealthy will create more jobs and increase opportunity for all. Whether presidents are consciously seeking to reward fellow partisans or merely pursuing different visions of how best to serve the national interest is difficult to determine.

However, through a pair of carefully chosen case studies on military base closings and natural disaster declarations, we are able to gain leverage on the question. In these narrow cases, objective economics alone should drive presidential decisions. Democratic presidents cannot credibly claim that the national interest is better served by closing a base in a Republican rather than a Democratic district, all else being equal. Similarly, how could a Republican president truthfully argue that responding to a natural disaster in a Republican district is in the national interest, but ignoring a disaster that caused equivalent levels of damage in a Democratic district is not? Thus, if we find evidence of partisan particularism in these cases, it would testify to the paramount importance of partisan motives and imperatives.

2.3 Coalitional Particularism

Partisan incentives and a desire to bolster the strength of their legislative coalitions can combine to induce another form of presidential particularism: presidents may target benefits to parts of the country that

⁴⁶ Gelman (2008).

elect co-partisans to Congress. In one of the only other political science analyses of presidential targeting, Christopher Berry, Barry Burden, and William Howell find that presidents engage in precisely this behavior.⁴⁷

Targeting grant dollars to the constituencies of co-partisan members can serve a number of goals. First, contemporary presidents face strong demands from all corners to be a strong party leader. Core constituency targeting is one way to respond to such pressures. Shifting more federal resources toward districts represented by co-partisan members can also help satisfy these demands. Second, co-partisan targeting provides presidents with valuable political currency on Capitol Hill. Members of Congress value specific federal benefits such as grants for their districts. By helping co-partisans procure them, presidents seek to win political favors that they can call on for support of their major priorities. Indeed, solidifying support among their co-partisans on Capitol Hill has long been recognized as a key legislative coalition-building strategy.⁴⁸ Third, presidents may target federal dollars to co-partisan members' constituencies with an eye toward the future in the hopes of bolstering their party's ranks in succeeding Congresses. While political pundits often emphasize various sources of presidential power, such as the president's eloquence, his arm-twisting ability in private negotiations, or his standing among the public, decades of research show that the strength of the president's party in the legislature is the most important factor influencing the president's success in Congress.⁴⁹ As a result, through this type of particularistic targeting, presidents can pursue a mix of partisan and legislative goals.

2.4 Presidential Particularism and the Political Business Cycle

Thus far, we have focused on the *who* of the particularistic president. That is, we have identified three types of constituencies that presidents might endeavor to target with additional federal resources: swing states, core states, and constituencies represented by co-partisans in Congress. Yet, the logic of the particularistic president also suggests differences in

⁴⁷ Berry et al. (2010). For a similar logic concerning the distribution of campaign fundraising efforts, see Jacobson et al. (2004). For other studies examining the role of the president in the allocation of federal spending, see Bertelli and Grose (2009); Frisch and Kelly (2011); Gimpel et al. (2012); Hudak (2012); Larcinese et al. (2006); Shor (2006). For a different interpretation of the empirical evidence for this type of targeting, see Dynes and Huber (2015).

⁴⁸ Cohen (2006); Edwards (2000).

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007); Beckman (2010); Canes-Wrone and De Marchi (2002); Marshall and Prins (2007); Rivers and Rose (1985).

when presidents should target these types of constituencies. To this end, we outline a further testable implication of our theory. If presidents are actively targeting federal dollars to swing states for reelection purposes, they should be especially incentivized to do so during an election year.

One of our central claims is that presidents respond to electoral incentives to target federal dollars to swing states. This behavior, we argue, is motivated by voters who reward the commander-in-chief for federal spending in their local communities. Because swing states have disproportionate influence over the next presidential contest, presidents should logically direct as many federal resources as possible to communities within battleground states. But should presidents pursue such swing state targeting with the same vigor throughout their term in office? Or does the incentive to target federal grants for electoral gain increase as the next election nears?

Political scientists have long searched for evidence of a political business cycle in presidential politics. If voters focus on factors in the immediate runup to an election instead of evaluating performance over an entire four-year term, then politicians have incentives to pursue short-term improvements of the election-year economy.⁵⁰ Edward Tufte was one of the first to present evidence of this behavior.⁵¹ Among the anecdotal evidence he offers was that in 1972, an election year, Richard Nixon notified Social Security recipients that the Congress had passed and he had signed into law a 20 percent increase in their benefits. To ensure that the message was not lost on voters, Nixon had it printed on the envelope.⁵² In a study of presidential elections from 1948 to 2005, Larry Bartels finds evidence of a broader trend. Republican presidents see exceptionally high income growth during election years (perhaps a result of explicit policy choices), which may be a reason for their success in presidential elections despite weaker income growth over the entirety of their administrations.⁵³ Though the logic of retrospective voting suggests that voters' evaluations of presidents should be based on economic performance over their entire tenure in office, virtually every study linking economic outcomes to presidential vote share has focused exclusively on economic performance during the election year itself.⁵⁴ The data is unambiguous: short-term economic conditions have much greater

⁵⁰ On voter myopia see Healy and Lenz (2014); Huber et al. (2012); Kramer (1971).

⁵¹ Tufte (1978).

⁵² Tufte (1978, 32).

⁵³ Bartels (2008, 106).

⁵⁴ Bartels (2008, 100).

influence on electoral outcomes than do more temporally distant economic data.

Presidents may always favor swing states; however, if our theory of electoral particularism is correct, the incentives to do so are even greater in election years. Thus, a further observable implication of our theory is that the evidence of swing state targeting should be even stronger in election years than in the first three years of a president's term.

We can also use the electoral calendar to gain greater insight into the mechanisms driving core state targeting. If presidents target core states primarily for electoral purposes, then core state targeting should be more prominent in election years. However, as we argued, core state targeting is not as efficient for electoral purposes as targeting swing states. Instead, core state targeting may be better explained by presidents' desire to pursue policies that cater to the needs of their fellow partisans in the mass public. If core state targeting primarily serves non-electoral goals, we should not expect levels of core state targeting to fluctuate with the electoral calendar.

2.5 Whither Congress?

Many of the policy areas we examine in the chapters that follow involve varying aspects of divide-the-dollar politics. Given this emphasis on distributive politics, some will undoubtedly be surprised that our discussion focuses on the president and not on Congress. After all, Article I of the Constitution entrusts the power of the purse to the legislature. As a result, with a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of studies examining the distribution of federal resources treats Congress as the main (or even the only) political player.

The president is just one of many politicians who influence the distribution of federal spending. Governors, mayors, and bureaucrats also undoubtedly shape the allocation of federal resources. We acknowledge that legislators play a key role in shaping budgetary outcomes; however, we warn that analysts of budgetary politics ignore the presidency at their peril. We do not claim that presidents unilaterally control the geographic allocation of the bulk of federal spending (though in Chapters 3 and 4 we examine several important cases in which presidents *do* wield such unilateral control). Nevertheless, through a variety of levers employed both during the legislative process itself and in the policy implementation phase, we argue that presidents have the capacity to influence the distribution of federal dollars across the country. As we have shown, presidents

TABLE 2.1. *Summary of Hypotheses*

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| | <i>Universalism</i> |
| Null Hypothesis | The allocation of federal policy benefits across constituencies should not be correlated with a state’s or county’s political characteristics. |
| | <i>Particularism</i> |
| | <i>Electoral</i> |
| Swing State Hypothesis | All else being equal, counties in swing states should receive more federal benefits than counties in uncompetitive states in the upcoming presidential election. |
| Election Year Hypothesis | Counties in swing states should receive an even greater share of federal dollars in presidential election years than in off years. Effect will be even stronger when president is running for reelection. |
| | <i>Partisan</i> |
| Core State Hypothesis | All else being equal, core states that strongly support the president’s party should receive more federal dollars than other states. |
| | <i>Coalitional</i> |
| Co-Partisan Hypothesis | Presidents should also target federal dollars to constituencies represented by their fellow partisans in Congress. |

have incentives to pursue a different distribution of federal dollars than legislators pursue. The ability of presidents to influence spending is most often akin to a thumb on the scale. It is a bias, and the magnitude of the bias can be examined only through systematic analyses such as those we present in the chapters that follow. If there is no bias, then the political variables discussed earlier, such as whether a state is a swing state or a core state and the stage in the political business cycle, should not predict the share of federal spending that a constituency receives.

Ultimately, the relative influence of presidents and Congress over the geographic distribution of federal dollars is an empirical question. Our analysis of federal grant allocation at the county level explicitly tests for the influence of both branches of government by examining which constituencies receive the most federal funds – those that are of critical importance to the president or those that are championed by key members of Congress. Through these analyses, we endeavor to show that many features of the allocation of grants across the country reflect the interests

and desires of the president and would not arise under a system dominated exclusively by legislators at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

2.6 Recap

The two views of presidential electoral politics we discuss in this chapter produce two distinct sets of hypotheses about the types of policies presidents should pursue. In the chapters that follow, we test these predictions empirically. The hypotheses are summarized for quick reference in Table 2.1. The first framework, based on the assumption that voters hold incumbent administrations accountable primarily for national conditions, posits presidential universalism. Presidents maximize their and their party's electoral fortunes by pursuing policies that best serve the national interest. This leads to the expectation that presidents will not target federal benefits to specific constituencies based on their political characteristics. By contrast, recent scholarship arguing that voters also vote for president based on local policy outcomes suggests a different set of incentives for presidents. Rather than pursuing universalism, presidents have incentives to target federal resources disproportionately toward some constituencies and away from others. Electoral incentives encourage swing state targeting. Partisan imperatives incentivize presidents to disproportionately reward core partisan constituencies. A combination of partisan and coalitional incentives also motivate presidents to channel benefits toward constituencies represented by co-partisan members of Congress.