

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Merit or Marionettes? An Analysis of Decision-Making and the Political Control of Federal Project Grant Awards

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Abstract

Project grants, which are designated to fund a particular program or initiative, are supposed to be awarded based on the technical merit of the grant application. However, public administrators are commonly influenced by political priorities. We ask whether administrators prioritize merit or political objectives when awarding project grants. We identify three decision-making processes used to award project grants: political, administrative, and exported. Then, using data from eight U.S. federal grant programs from 2008 – 2015, we analyze whether grants using each of these decision-making processes show signs of political influence. We find evidence that grants using either political or administrative forms of decision-making are susceptible to legislative priorities. Grants awarded by third-party experts show no evidence of political influence. We conclude that political factors are important for the allocation of project grants, offering insights into the interdependent relationship between legislators and administrators.

Keywords: Decision-Making, Politics, Grants, Contracts, Pork Barrel Politics, Federalism, Political Control, Bureaucratic Politics, Public Administration.

1. Introduction

Every day, millions of public officials make decisions that affect public programs and policies across all levels of the government. The savvy decision-maker applies a combination of relevant political considerations, organizational rules, and expertise to make their choice (Lindblom 1959). However, what constitutes good judgment is elusive, as contextual factors often complicate the decisions that officials make. Decision-making is particularly complex for those charged with administering grant programs, who must balance political preferences, administrative expertise, and technical factors when making their decision (Conlan 2010). Few studies have attempted to determine which of these factors is most important in the grant allocation process.

In the United States, grants are an important policy

implementation tool, with resources and priorities often determined by the federal government. While block grants have historically been the predominate type of grant, project grants are increasingly used to increase competition and leverage market dynamics (Conlan 2010). Project grants often rely on a combination of legal formulae, administrative discretion, and hired third-party expertise during grant review. This encourages a focus on technical merit over political preferences (Salamon 2002). But can such decisions be separated from politics? This research investigates the extent to which political control and interdependence between the administrators and legislators affects the selection of grant recipients. Are grants chosen based on their merit, or do administrators and technical experts act as marionettes who respond to the priorities of political actors?

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To lay a foundation for the categorization of the primary factors that influence grant decisions, the first section reviews existing research on decision-making, political control, and interdependence. Using this categorization of influencing factors, we present hypotheses about how decisions might be made in different contexts. The following sections introduce our data, analytical methods, and findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of results and implications for practitioners and scholars.

2. Decision-Making

The grant approval process is similar to other decisions that public officials make. It has long been noted that political considerations are a key component of public-sector decision-making, as the wise official tends to eliminate contentious policy options and instead focus on those which are most politically palatable (Lindblom 1959). Political actors attempt to use grants as a way to direct funds to their constituents (Conlan 1984, Dixit and Londregan 1998, Rich 1989, Volden 2007). In addition, administrators have been shown to be sensitive to the demands of political actors, particularly when resources are on the line. (Jordan 1981, Svava 2001, Malatesta and Smith 2014).

Organizational rules can both hinder and help decision-making, depending on how they are crafted, applied, and interpreted (Bozeman 1993, DeHart-Davis 2008). Rules can be a form of political control, as elected officials seek to monitor activities and reduce bureaucratic discretion (Wood and Waterman 1991, Gruber 1987). Rules can also be used to enable effective organizational management, primarily through establishing transparent, understandable processes and official repositories of procedures and preferences (DeHart-Davis 2008). Administrators operate in a complex organizational environment where rules can both constrain and facilitate their work.

At the individual level, decision-makers face additional challenges. Individuals are prone to poor risk assessment; overreliance on previous successes and failures to predict likelihood; preference over accuracy; use of confusing, subjective, or false data as their decision basis; and ignorance of the ambiguities of complex decision-making implications (Tetlock 2017). Limits to rationality can fuel these errors, as public sector decision-makers have been known to value means over ends and mutual agreement over objectivity in a way that can lead to a loss of feasibility and poor conceptualization of problems and

prospective effects (Lindblom 1959, Meltsner 1972, Jones 2003, Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005).

These macro and micro-level decision-making challenges imply an intricate relationship between decision-making and context. Political considerations, organizational rules, and the application of individual expertise manifest differently, as actors have a range of skillsets, responsibilities, and priorities. In the context of project grants, decision-makers primarily include elected officials, public administrators, and third-party experts hired to review applications. The following section describes the motivations of each of these three groups and how they are built into grant-award processes.

2.1 Political Motivations

Traditional political control over the bureaucracy has largely been viewed as a principal-agent problem wherein elected actors seek to curb agency behavior that runs contrary to their own interests (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987, Cook and Wood 1989, Weingast 1984, Macey 1992). Legislators exercise control through budgetary reviews and oversight hearings that police agency actions or respond to unforeseen problems (McCubbins & Schwartz 1984). However, these mechanisms can lead to inconsistent decisions as political preferences fluctuate over time (Macey 1992, Jones 2003).

Ample literature has studied the tendency for legislators to fill the pork barrel through regulation, sanctions for violations, preemptive agency takeover, and (for our purposes) the allocation of grants (Shepsle and Weingast 1981, Rich 1989, Zimmermann 1991). Evidence suggests that certain members of Congress are better positioned to “bring home the bacon” due to their majority party affiliation, committee membership, or seniority. These legislators push for disproportionate constituent benefits even in the face of inefficiency and cost overruns (Ferejohn 1974, Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981, Morgan and LaPlant 1996).

However extreme, a reciprocal relationship between legislator and constituent influences decision-making in two primary ways: 1) the legislator seeks to distribute benefits as a form of political or policy reward, and 2) the legislator attempts a broad allocation of benefits as a means of affecting as many people as possible to garner mass support for reelection (Fiorina 1981, Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981, Rich 1991). Grants can be used to accomplish either objective, especially targeted project grants that can be dedicated to a specific initiative or type of work.

2.2 Administrative Motivations

While legislators tend to retain control over important inputs to public organizations, such as resources and rules, they rely on administrative agencies to carry out their intentions. Public administrators perform their duties and wield important discretion about policy areas and programs with an understanding that any administrative action is potentially subject to political control. Thus, administrators operate in an environment of shared control, but maintain authority to make many important public decisions.

Administrative authority is often used to translate legislative intent into agency-specific policy, but as officials make day-to-day program decisions they inevitably apply their own technical expertise and contextual considerations (Christensen, Goerdel, and Nicholson-Crotty 2011, O'Toole and Meier 2015, Kaufman 1956). Administrators frequently possess expertise which legislative officials may lack, and which lawmakers rely upon for policy implementation success (Hjern 1982, O'Toole 2000, Friedrich 1940). From this perspective, administrators may be more likely to value (and better assess) the technical merit of policies and programs than their politically elected counterparts, since they tend to be hired and promoted based on their technical expertise (Nigro, Nigro, and Kellough 2012).

There has been longstanding debate over how much to insulate administrative actors from political influence (Wilson 1887, Friedrich 1940, Finer 1941, Long 1952, Moe and Gilmour 1995). Though no resolution is likely in the near term, it is evident that administrators are truly not separate from politics (Rosenbloom 2008). Instead, they perform a delicate balancing act of making decisions that apply the latest technical expertise while simultaneously making judgments about political feasibility and their own beliefs and aspirations (Svara 2001). Thus, administrators are likely to combine technical, political, and personal priorities.

2.3 Third Party Motivations

Decision-making authority may be further delegated to third parties who are not public employees. Bureaucracy increasingly implements its programs indirectly through privatization efforts that contract out the delivery and management of citizen goods and services to for-profit private business or non-profit organizations (Ferris and Graddy 1986, Bingman and Pitsvada 1997). In some instances, third parties are employed to separate implementation of public

programs from political influence (Moe and Gilmour 1995, Fernandez, Ryu, and Brudney 2008). A growing number of wealthy local governments have opted to contract out nearly all public services due to a belief that this reduces political infighting and allows private-sector experts to manage their programs more efficiently (Prager 2008). In many other instances, consultants and other third-party experts are brought in to provide expertise to public officials as they seek to make decisions. This is a longstanding practice, but historically administrators and public employees retained the authority to make final decisions.

In recent years, decision-making authority has been increasingly exported to third parties, particularly over highly technical grants in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Bornmann 2011, Lee et al. 2013). Though some have bemoaned the lost public control of government programs, it is evident that many view the use of third-parties as a way to reduce political influence, promote merit-based decision-making, and find innovative solutions (Moe 1987, Rosenbloom and Piotrowski 2005, Friedrich 1940, Mitroff and Chubin 1979, Roy 1985, Chubin and Hackett 1990, Marsh, Jayasinghe, and Bond 2008, Collins 2010). However, these exported decisions come with other potential problems, as third parties have been accused of rigging the deck to benefit themselves and their allies (Smith 2006, Lee et al. 2013, Gilmour and Jensen 1998). Third-party contractors are less accountable to democratic rules and oversight (Moe 1987), can capture those who manage them (Girth 2017), and are hard to terminate (Brunjes, 2022). Though contractor motivations include maximizing profit and undermining competitors for future market advantage (Brown, Potoski, and Van Slyke 2006), they are also often motivated to provide high quality goods and services to government and service recipients (Lambright 2008). Due to the expertise of third parties and the potential for efficiency gains, decision-making continues to be contracted out in many highly technical areas, including project grants.

2.4 Types Control of Decision-Making

The previous sections introduced the motivations of the three primary actors responsible for the design, implementation, and control of many federal programs, including project grants. Based on this analysis, we hold that the grantmaking process involves a set of three different types of decisions:

1. *Political decisions* made by legislators;

2. *Administrative decisions* by bureaucrats who strive to balance the demands of technical merit with the political realities of administration; and

3. *Exported decisions* made by third parties hired to focus largely on technical merit.

Different decision-makers use these processes to accomplish their various priorities. Legislators, concerned with re-election, use political decision-making processes to steer funds to their home districts or important constituent groups. Administrators, hired

as technical experts, attempt to make decisions on the basis of merit, but may feel the need to consider political and personal priorities due to high levels of interdependence for resources and program design. To ensure a focus on programmatic objectives and to isolate decisions from political influence, administrators may export decision-making to third-party experts, who may also prioritize their own financial gain (making them dependent on the administrator).

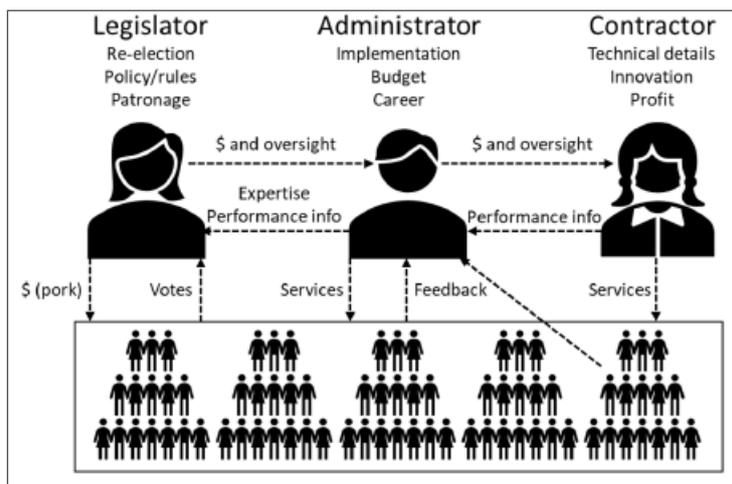


Figure 1. *Priorities and Interdependencies of Decision-Makers*

As shown in Figure 1, the locus of control can be expected to have different outcomes based on the decision-maker’s priorities, the degree of interdependence between the organizations involved in the decision, and the degree to which political actors can influence the decision. This model is readily applicable to the grant award process, where each of the different decision-makers are commonly involved in the review of applications. To test this conceptual model of grant program decision-making, it is necessary to first explain the variations among grant programs. The following section introduces the basics of grants, grant management, and decision-making in the United States, clearly linking these influencing factors to project grants.

3. Public Grants

At its core, a grant is a contract that exchanges resources, usually money, from a donor organization to a recipient to accomplish a policy goal(s). Central governments are the chief grant donors, as they seek to distribute or redistribute tax revenues to subordinate governments to stimulate activity in a new area or support ongoing activity of priority (Nicholson-Crotty 2015, Fisher 1996). Other donors include nonprofit foundations and regional or local governments. Grant recipients vary and include national and subnational

governments, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and even individuals.

Unlike more traditional contracts, grants tend to place less emphasis on delivery of goods and services themselves, instead providing relatively open-ended resources (Salamon 2002). In the United States block and categorical grants are the most commonly used types of grants. Block grants augment funding in a particular policy area (e.g. transportation, community development, emergency preparedness), but tend to leave issues of implementation up to the recipient. Though there are relatively few block grant programs in the U.S., this is where the bulk of federal grant spending occurs. Block grants are generally disseminated based on a formula written into authorizing legislation. Thus, the block grant decision-making process is inherently political, often determined by political actors or subject to their approval (Conlan 1984).

More like contracts, categorical grants are used to fund more narrowly defined activities. The donor often specifies the exact program or purpose for the funds, requiring recipients to agree to pre-established terms. Many categorical grants are allocated as project grants wherein organizations compete to receive the grant funding, inserting additional quasi-

contract mechanisms into the grant-making process. Government agencies draft detailed explanations of the purpose for the grant funding, eligibility requirements, technical qualifications required to do the work, evaluation and performance assessment criteria, and how recipient activities during and following the grant's period of performance will be monitored. In theory, decisions about which project grants to fund should be based on the merits of the grant applications (Salamon 2002). Reviewers should make decisions using their technical training and expertise as a gauge for quality.

However, there is some evidence that other grants have been used as a means for political actors to fund pet programs or important allies (Rich 1991, Gamkhar and Ali 2007). Indeed, the grant decision-making process is inherently political, as it involves a variety of actors. Legislative authorities create grant programs, including rules that designate purpose of the grant and eligibility criteria. These rules usually establish base funding levels for grant programs, and then designate criteria for additional allocations such as management structures and other reporting requirements. For example, the Homeland Security Grant Program and Outdoor Recreation Acquisition grants, though project grants, include political established formulae in their decision-making process. For such programs, each state receives a base amount of funding and the remainder is disseminated based on an assessment of need and application quality.

Other grant programs, such as those for Community Policing, Housing for Homeless Veterans, and Clean Air Research, delegate decision-making authority to public administrators who are specifically hired to review applications and manage the grants following award. This is consistent with longstanding personnel practices that prioritize administrative technical expertise as a condition of employment. In performing their grant application reviews, administrators maintain some insulation from legislative influence through due process rights protections such as tenure and dispute resolution (Nigro, Nigro, and Kellough 2012).

For project grant awards necessitating great technical proficiency, particularly those in STEM fields, administrators may be insufficient. In these instances, agencies bring in third-parties, usually peer subject matter experts (SMEs), to review applications for project grants to ensure that (a) decisions are made entirely on the quality of the application, and (b) political influence in the decision-making process is

further limited (Kotchen et al. 2004). This largely exports decision-making for a particular recipient's grant award to the SMEs, who are remunerated for their time and effort, essentially serving as a contractor.

Grant program decision-making demonstrates considerable variation in function, with some decisions made based on political priorities, others the result of administrative balancing, and still others as a result of expert-led assessment. Given how this variation distributes authority between actors in the grant-making process, it is reasonable to expect differences in political influence based on type. Based on the previous assessment of decision-making and its application to federal grants, the following section presents the hypotheses for this research.

4. Hypotheses

As stated, the federal government utilizes project grants as a tool to accomplish specific purposes. Grant award decision-making varies with some grant funding dispersed based on, at least in part, legislative rules and formulae that determine eligibility. One important way that legislators wield their political authority is through work on congressional committees, where such rules and formulae are developed and written into legislation. Seniority and overall representation on legislative committees has been shown to be positively correlated with spending outcomes (Stein 1981). It has long been established that legislators use grant programs to generate "pork" for their districts and their political allies (Alvarez and Saving 1997, Conlan 1984, Rich 1991, Posner and Wrightson 1996). Under such conditions, it is reasonable to expect that formula-based project grants will exhibit signs of political influence. Thus, we arrive at the following hypotheses:

H₁: States with more representation on the legislative committees responsible for political project grants will receive more grants.

H₂: States with more representation on the legislative committees responsible for political project grants will receive more grant funds.

Other grants are dispersed based on administrative decisions where bureaucrats apply their expertise to determine the most qualified applicants. As the earlier discussion indicates, these administratively led decisions do not operate in an environment devoid of politics. Norton Long asserted that administrators must actively seek power and authority to ensure that their agency receives both the attention and resources necessary to accomplish its objectives (Long 1949).

One way this is achieved is by forming a tripartite relationship with legislators and their relevant interest groups (Lowry and Potoski 2004, Ashley and Van Slyke 2012, Jordan 1981). Experienced lawmakers can provide stable budgets and lax oversight in return for administrative decisions that favor their political priorities. Administrators seeking to balance technical merit with organizational needs are likely to consider legislative demands. Thus, we arrive at the following hypotheses:

H₃: States with more senior representation on the legislative committees responsible for administrative project grants will receive more grants.

H₄: States with more senior representation on the legislative committees responsible for administrative project grants will receive more grant funds.

Other project grant programs export decision-making to peer experts that are fairly isolated from political influence. These review groups are used primarily to ensure that the review process focuses on the quality of the grant proposal itself (Horrobin 1990). To ensure this, certain project grants rely on individuals who are (a) issue experts in the very narrow field where the grant funds are to be awarded, and (b) not exclusively reliant on legislative organizations for their funding. Though there are documented problems with this approach, there is little evidence to suggest that exported decision-making is open to political influence from legislators (Roy 1985, Smith 2006, Lee et al. 2013).

H₅: States with elected officials on committees responsible for exported project grants will not receive any significant financial or quantity benefit.

5. Data and Methods

This analysis assesses the extent to which different decision-making pressures influence how federal project grants are allocated. The unit of analysis is the state. We assess the allocation of grants from eight U.S. federal project grant programs from 2008–2015. Data on grants and grant spending come from USASpending.gov, a federal transparency initiative designed to make information on federal spending on grants, contracts, loans, and cooperative agreements publicly accessible. There are two primary dependent variables used: (1) the number of new grants written each year to each state, and (2) the total amount of spending in each state. The analysis incorporates five explanatory variables: the number of legislators on each committee from each state (a count of

legislators), the seniority of those legislators within their party (their rank order), the tenure of those legislators on the committee (a count of years), and dichotomous indicators for committee leadership and party leadership. To analyze the data, we employ fixed-effects, panel data regression models using the equation below:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_{1it} + \beta_2 X_{2it} + \beta_3 X_{3it} + \beta_4 X_{4it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

In this model, Y_{it} is the dependent variable, either the total number of new grants written to the state or the overall grant funding, where i refers to the state (entity) and t indicates the year (time). For this analysis, we have chosen eight competitive project grant programs based on their size and the decision-making procedures used for each. The result is a mix of grant programs that includes all three types of decision-making procedures across different agencies in the federal government. Table 1 provides a brief look at the eight grant programs, and further discussion of their merit and selection can be found in the appendix. We follow 51 states (all U.S. states plus Washington, D.C.) over 8 total years, resulting in balanced panels with a total n of 408.

β_1 refers to the coefficients of a group of explanatory variables indicating representation levels (number, seniority, tenure, etc.) on relevant committees in the U.S. House of Representatives. β_2 refers to the coefficients of a group of explanatory variables indicating representation levels (number, seniority, tenure, etc.) on the relevant committees in the U.S. Senate. β_3 refers to the coefficients of a group of control variables for state resident characteristics, including overall population, per capita income, and population density. β_4 refers to the coefficients of a group of control variables for state economic conditions, including annual change in gross domestic product, state government spending per capita, and the proportional contribution of relevant industries to state GDP. These latter controls are included to account for important economic variations between states, as some states simply have more of a particular type of industry than other states and thus might receive more related grants or grant funds.

We model each of the grant programs separately for both the number of grants and total grant spending, resulting in 16 total fixed-effects models. For the spending models, we use the natural logarithm of the actual amount spent to normalize the distribution. Variance inflation factors do not exceed 4.0 for any variable, and pair-wise correlations between variables

Table 1. *Attributes of Selected Federal Project Grant Programs*

CFDA	Description	Selection	Decision-Making	State Match Required?	Progress Reports	Financial Reports	Average Value
93.393	Cancer Research	Competitive	Exported	No	Annually	Annually	\$450,000
47.076	STEM Education (EHR)	Competitive	Exported + Admin.	No	Annually	Quarterly	\$260,000
84.334	GEAR-UP	Competitive	Exported	Yes	Annually	Annually	\$1,800,000
97.067	Homeland Security	Formula + Competitive	Political	No	Quarterly	Quarterly	\$19,000,000
17.805	Homeless Veterans	Competitive	Admin.	No	Quarterly	Quarterly	\$230,000
15.916	Outdoor Recreation	Formula + Competitive	Political	Yes	Annually	Annually	\$200,000
16.710	Public Safety	Competitive	Admin	No	Annually	Quarterly	\$640,000
66.034	Clean Air	Competitive	Admin.	Yes	Quarterly	Quarterly	\$150,000

never exceed 0.4, indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem in these data. Robust standard errors are used to account for heteroskedasticity.

6. Findings

Results of the regression analyses can be found in Tables 2 and 3. Each column represents the results of a single model. The grant program analyzed in each program is listed at the top of each column. The rows describe the explanatory or control variables. Table 2 displays results for models where the dependent variable is the number of new project grants each year. Coefficients can be interpreted as the number of additional grants based on a single unit increase of the explanatory or control variable. Table 3 displays results for models where the dependent variable is the natural logarithm of the total annual spending on project grants. Coefficients on Table 3 indicate the direction of the correlation, as the coefficient itself indicates little about effect magnitude (since the dependent variable has undergone a logarithm transformation).

The first two hypotheses relate to grants that use political decision-making processes. Shown in models 4, 6, 12, and 14, these two grant programs (Homeland Security and Outdoor Recreation) include a combination of statutory formulae as part of the process to determine grant allocations. We hypothesize that states with more legislators on related committees will receive more grants and more funds. The analysis shows that the addition of a single representative to the House Homeland Security Committee nets an

increase of 0.14 grants for the state. Similarly, adding a representative to the House Natural Resources Committee nets more than 2 additional grants for the state, as does an additional representative on the corresponding Senate committee. This is evidence that project grants that incorporate political decision-making mechanisms are influenced by political actors. Our first hypothesis is supported.

Our second hypothesis holds that states with more members on these committees will also receive more funds, not just more grants. The analysis shows that an additional legislator on both the Senate and House committees increases resources for state Outdoor Recreation programs. However, additional legislators do not affect the allocation Homeland Security grant funds. This hypothesis is only partially supported. The difference may be in the policy area of the grant program – domestic security funding has been shown to be somewhat insulated from political influence due to the widely accepted risks associated with diverting funds from sites where they are most needed (Prante and Bohara 2008).

The third and fourth hypotheses hold that experienced and powerful politicians will be able to influence the allocation of administrative grants and the funding amounts, as administrators consider political priorities when making grant awards. There are three grants that use administrative decision-making mechanisms in the study: Homeless Veterans, Public Safety, and Clean Air. As expected, each of these programs shows strong influence from legislators with committee seniority, committee leaders, and legislators with

Table 2. Effect of Political Control on Number of New Project Grants

Results of 8 Fixed-Effects Panel Data Analysis Models

	Model 1 Cancer Coeff (RSE)	Model 2 EHR Coeff (RSE)	Model 3 GEAR- UP Coeff (RSE)	Model 4 HSGP Coeff (RSE)	Model 5 Veterans Coeff (RSE)	Model 6 Outdoor Rec. Coeff (SE)	Model 7 Public Safety Coeff (RSE)	Model 8 Clear Air Coeff (RSE)
Decision-Making Method	Exported	Exported	Exported	Political	Administrative	Political	Administrative	Administrative
House Total	2.84 (3.33)	9.16 (3.47) **	-8.30 (5.20)	0.14 (0.03) ***	-2.73 (182)	2.85 (0.94) **	5.07 (2.02)	-1.48 (1.11)
House Seniority	-0.92 (0.63)	0.02 (0.25)	-0.41 (0.44)	-0.16 (0.17)	0.25 (0.11) **	-0.05 (0.11)	0.12 (0.04) **	0.08 (0.03) ***
House Leadership	-7.59 (3.14) *	-0.93 (2.98)	0.82 (3.01)	0.20 (0.64)	-0.14 (0.04) ***	0.31 (0.58)	2.36 (1.07) **	0.21 (0.08) ***
House Experience	-0.18 (1.61)	4.66 (1.64) ***	4.67 (3.02)	0.01 (0.43)	1.10 (0.41) **	-1.06 (0.37) **	8.64 (8.61)	0.50 (0.47)
House Majority	-0.07 (6.72)	-3.19 (2.45)	-6.93 (5.69)	0.61 (1.36)	0.30 (0.52)	0.23 (1.75)	-1.99 (6.17)	1.17 (0.85)
House Minority	8.60 (9.00)	1.83 (3.46)	-5.95 (4.92)	-0.15 (1.44)	-0.06 (0.33)	2.79 (2.10)	3.33 (8.95)	0.24 (1.05)
Senate Total	-0.38 (2.96)	-0.97 (0.97)	-3.47 (3.40)	-0.34 (0.26)	0.44 (0.35)	2.25 (0.73) **	2.56 (3.98)	0.37 (0.43)
Senate Leadership	-1.18 (2.93)	1.98 (1.27)	-1.24 (0.97)	-0.55 (0.34) *	0.18 (0.25)	-0.48 (1.61)	15.47 (8.19)	-0.03 (0.04)
Senate Seniority	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.08)	0.21 (0.10) *	0.03 (0.03)	0.08 (0.02) ***	0.02 (0.05)	0.33 (0.16) *	0.29 (0.14) *
Senate Majority	-21.73 (9.01) *	5.81 (6.70)	-2.21 (4.16)	-2.22 (0.98) **	-0.67 (1.12)	2.20 (1.71)	-6.11 (6.03)	-0.84 (1.00)
Senate Minority	-10.53 (6.88)	4.14 (6.97)	-1.79 (4.40)	-2.09 (0.72)	-0.54 (0.77)	1.85 (1.14)	-2.85 (4.84)	0.61 (0.41)
Population	0.00 (0.00) *	-0.00 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.00) **	0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00) **	-0.00 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.00) *
Per Capita Income	-0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) ***	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) **	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Population Density	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.03 (0.00) ***	-0.01 (0.00) **
GDP Change	-2.26 (7.29)	-16.86 (11.55)	55.23 (18.38) **	-0.24 (1.57)	1.14 (1.88)	-15.11 (6.34) *	-86.44 (23.61) ***	6.81 (5.89)
State Spending	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00) *	-0.00 (0.00) +	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.03 (0.01) **	-0.00 (0.00)
Industry Control	2.13 (6.79)	-13.13 (9.55)	12.21 (5.99) *	0.00 (0.00) +	0.00 (0.00) +	-1.53 (0.99)	-0.01 (0.0) *	-1.65 (1.77)
Industry Control 2	4.17 (2.68)	-7.55 (4.32) +	-1.29 (2.05)	N/A	N/A	0.06 (0.06)	N/A	0.84 (0.59)
Intercept	34.37 (25.11)	172.46 (15.27) ***	11.82 (14.34)	-14.85 (4.12) ***	-12.57 (3.56) ***	-11.44 (10.24)	87.14 (23.21) ***	6.30 (4.09)
Overall R²	0.33	0.35	0.09	0.36	0.26	0.40	0.33	0.39
Within R²	0.13	0.43	0.35	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.22	0.18
Panels	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Observations	408	408	408	408	408	408	408	408
Groups	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51

Table 3. Effect of Political Control on Spending on New Project Grants

Results of 8 Fixed-Effects Panel Data Analysis Models

	Model 9 Cancer Coeff (RSE)	Model 10 EHR Coeff (RSE)	Model 11 GEAR- UP Coeff (RSE)	Model 12 HSGP Coeff (RSE)	Model 13 Veterans Coeff (RSE)	Model 14 Outdoor Rec. Coeff (RSE)	Model 15 Public Safety Coeff (RSE)	Model 16 Clear Air Coeff (RSE)
Decision-Making Method	Exported	Exp. + Admin.	Exported	Political	Administrative	Political	Administrative	Administrative
House Total	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.09 (0.40)	0.03 (0.13)	-2.44 (0.79)*	0.22 (0.09) **	0.10 (0.70)	-0.01 (0.04)
House Seniority	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.12 (0.05) *	0.13 (0.05) **	-0.01 (0.04)	0.04 (0.02) *	0.01 (0.00) *
House Leadership	-0.13 (0.10)	0.05 (0.04)	0.13 (0.33)	-0.15 (0.26)	0.05 (0.02) **	-0.13 (0.18)	0.24 (0.10) *	-0.13 (0.06) *
House Experience	0.00 (0.05)	0.06 (0.02) **	0.01 (0.18)	0.07 (0.05)	1.01 (0.39) **	-0.08 (0.12)	0.05 (0.02) **	0.07 (0.02) ***
House Majority	-0.24 (0.16)	0.00 (0.10)	-0.24 (0.39)	-0.02 (0.17)	0.41 (0.60)	-0.07 (0.47)	0.47 (0.30)	-0.05 (0.10)
House Minority	-0.15 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.07)	0.07 (0.34)	0.28 (0.16)	-0.06 (0.58)	0.03 (0.65)	-0.15 (0.32)	0.01 (0.13)
Senate Total	0.05 (.10)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.12 (0.09)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.13 (0.54)	0.62 (0.23) **	-0.32 (0.27)	0.07 (0.06)
Senate Seniority	0.01 (0.09)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.03 (0.01) **	-0.06 (0.06)	0.47 (0.17) ***	0.02 (0.01) *	0.16 (0.05) ***	0.01 (0.00) **
Senate Leadership	0.00 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.13 (0.15)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.06 (0.24)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.14 (0.12)
Senate Majority	-0.56 (0.43)	-0.55 (0.35)	0.18 (0.34)	0.32 (0.40)	-0.22 (1.29)	-0.02 (0.69)	-0.32 (0.70)	0.04 (0.15)
Senate Minority	0.25 (0.33)	0.11 (0.11)	0.08 (0.23)	0.46 (0.35)	0.75 (0.79)	-0.24 (0.64)	-0.20 (0.34)	-0.07 (0.13)
Population	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Per Capita Income	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00) *	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00) ***	0.00 (0.00)
Population Density	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.00) ***	-0.00 (0.00)
GDP Change	1.20 (1.07)	0.72 (0.70)	1.91 (1.67)	-0.00 (0.00)	-5.47 (3.58)	-2.06 (2.48)	-2.75 (1.62)	0.30 (0.46)
State Spending	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) *	-0.48 (0.74)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Industry Control	0.02 (0.33)	0.21 (0.26)	1.72 (1.10)	0.00 (0.00) *	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.49 (0.37)	0.00 (0.00)	0.02 (0.22)
Industry Control 2	0.24 (0.17)	0.07 (0.08)	0.20 (0.62)	N/A	N/A	-0.00 (0.00)	N/A	-0.11 (0.10)
Intercept	15.30 (0.93)***	15.24 (0.53)***	18.87 (2.99)	22.95 (1.04)	1.03 (4.69)	13.69 (1.67) ***	22.69 (1.66) ***	14.99 (0.51) ***
Overall R²	0.12	0.37	0.08	0.35	0.47	0.44	0.35	0.42
Within R²	0.18	0.05	0.20	0.24	0.23	0.30	0.23	0.21
Panels	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Observations	408	408	408	408	408	408	408	408
Groups	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51

experience. These effects are particularly strong in the House, with only committee seniority significant for the Senate. However, legislators can increase the total funding and the number of grants that their states receive for all three grant programs. Both H3 and H4 are supported.

The final hypothesis is that grants which export the decision-making process to third party experts will not be affected by political actors. The analysis includes two grant programs that rely solely on exported decisions (Cancer and GEAR-UP), and one that blends exported and administrative decision-making (the NSF's STEM education investment program, abbreviated as EHR). Both fully exported grant programs show little sign of political influence, as no single political indicator is consistent in all four models. Senate seniority may influence the selection of GEAR-UP winners, but the effects, positive for the number of grants and negative for the funding of grants, seem to indicate that this finding may be statistical noise. In addition, the measures of fit on these models are much lower than on the other models, indicating that the explanatory variable for the decision made is very likely omitted. This is not surprising, as variables like application quality and technical merit are not included in the models. Nonetheless, this is initial evidence that exported decision-making is more effective at limiting political influence and ensuring that grants are disseminated based on technical or merit-based priorities.

The blended export-administrative grant program (EHR) demonstrates that the presence of administrative actors in the process can open the decision up to political influence. Both the total House representatives and committee experience are positively correlated with the number of grants given to states. In addition, expertise increases total funding. Senate committee representation does not exhibit similar effects. While these findings deserve additional analysis to identify the specific mechanism(s) at work, there are a few interpretations available at this stage. First, the EHR program provides funds for education in STEM fields, which has become an increasingly political issue over the past decade. As a result, legislators may be more committed to this grant program, as it will prepare their constituents for the 21st century economy. Second, the committee responsible for overseeing this program, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, has the most experienced group of legislators out of the House Committees included in this survey, with many of the representatives having

more than 10 years of service on the committee. This could indicate that these extremely capable (and likely science-minded) legislators, have both the background and experience to take advantage of the administrative procedures used to make EHR grant decisions.

Finally, it is worth noting that few of the control variables in these models are significant. In fact, none of them are consistently significant across all models. This is particularly surprising for industry controls, which could reasonably be expected to correlate with grant funding in certain policy areas. For example, the state's crime rate does not correlate with the allocation of Public Safety grants. Other studies have similar findings, and suggest that political preferences may be more influential than need or economic conditions (Evans and Owens 2007). Our findings may be an indication that politics tends to outweigh economic trends or cultural needs when it comes to selecting grant recipients. However, additional research is necessary to accurately interpret these findings.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Some scholars have famously described decision-making as the basic function of public administrators (Simon 1965, Lindblom 1959). However, public decisions are made in the context of complex organizations. As such, these decisions balance the needs of various stakeholders – legislators, administrators, and third parties – who share authority and resources that the others need. This results in an interdependence where decisions must account for the priorities of other actors apart from the technical merit of the grant application.

In this analysis, we study decisions made to allocate competitive federal project grants. Though in theory recipients of project grants should be chosen based on the merit of the grant application, we hold that three primary decision-making processes are used to select winners: political, administrative, and exported. These different approaches place the decision in the hands of different stakeholders, each with different priorities. Project grants are competitive, which should allow governments the chance to leverage market forces to make advances in very important policy areas (Conlan 2010, Salamon 2002). Our sample includes cancer and clean air research, STEM education investments, veterans' housing solutions, purchasing land for national parks, education programs for the less fortunate, homeland security funding, and public

safety – areas where many might feel that technically based decisions would be best. We sought to determine the extent of political influence throughout the process – when decisions are delegated by law, do the decision-makers select grants based on merit, or do they instead serve as marionettes for political actors?

We find evidence that both political and administrative decision-making processes are open to political influence. Political decision-making that employs legislative formulae to guide funding choices is a process legislators have long used to influence fund allocation. However, we also find that when decision-making authority is delegated to administrators who theoretically should be more insulated from politics, decisions on competitive project grant awards and funding go to states with powerful politicians. This is likely because administrators are dependent on legislators such that they account for long-term relationship-building when making decisions. However, when decisions are exported to third party peers or SMEs, decisions seem to be insulated from political preferences.

For practitioners, the implications are that politics extends well into the area of administrative decision-making where it may not be as expected to reside. If agencies are concerned with building and maintaining strong relationships with legislators, tasking administrators to manage grant awards may be advisable. However, if agencies seek to make decisions based purely on the application's merit, it seems best to employ third party experts to help in the decision-making process.

For scholars, our findings are consistent with prior studies on block grants, but advance them in important ways. We find strong evidence of political influence in project grant decision-making processes. As a result, we find little evidence of the separation of politics from administrative decisions about project grants. States with greater representation and more experienced or ranking representation tend to receive more grants and more grant funding. Legislators are using project grants to benefit narrow groups of their constituents. This is somewhat surprising, since using project grants in this manner can be risky, as it is possible that other groups may be offended by perceived preferential treatment (Fiorina 1981).

However, what is clear is that project grant awards are a strategic action field where legislators and administrators actively account for shared preferences

and attempt to influence policy (Sandfort and Moulton 2014). Legislators have certain policy priorities in the grant decision-making process. Administrators tasked with making grant decisions seem to recognize these priorities and act on them. Thus, political actors can influence grant program implementation even after establishing rules that seem to allocate decisions to technical experts.

Exported decisions, however, focus on merit. This is consistent with previous research that finds that public and private organizations make decisions based on different factors, with public organizations preferring bargaining and private organizations relying on technical analysis (Nutt 2005). In the case of project grants, administrators may be willing to use them to provide leverage in their longer-term negotiations with legislators while simultaneously satisfying agency-specific objectives. Exported decision-making processes, however, focus more on the technical analysis of grant application quality.

This research provides some initial evidence of political influence in project grant awards. Future studies should seek to determine how individual decisions about project grants are being made and the ways that different forms of decision-making apply in context. A detailed qualitative study of the interactions between administrators and legislators would be helpful. Future studies should also include administrative variables, which have been shown more influential than political variables in certain contexts (O'Toole and Meier 2004). Finally, more detailed studies of blended decision-making forms, such as those that are used in NSF's STEM education investment grant program (EHR), could provide more insight into the relative importance of each actor in the decision-making process.

In recent years there has been a push to make government more like business (Osborne and Gaebler 1992, Box 2014). One way that this has manifested has been through increasing efforts to make grants more competitive. Based on our research, the decision-making processes used in these competitive procedures matter a great deal. It is important for policymakers, practitioners, and academics to consider carefully what they seek to achieve from competitive grant programs. Though some may trumpet these competitive mechanisms as a way to ensure the selection of the most meritorious recipients, it seems likely that these procedures may often be a way to advance other, politically motivated objectives.

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Appendix: Description of Federal Grant Programs

This analysis assesses eight federal grant programs, each of which use different procedures to select winning proposals. These programs were selected due to diversity of allocation and decision-making processes, as well as the size and regularity of their application procedures. As mentioned, the purpose of this analysis is to determine if there is evidence of political influence on these grant decisions, and to identify potential reasons for why and how political and administrative actors interact during the decision-making process. The following sections introduce

each of the eight project grant programs, including the agency responsible, the purpose and size of the grant program, applicant eligibility, and award procedures, with particular attention to the degree to which these procedures are isolated from political influence. Table 1, in the paper, encapsulates information about the agency, size, decision-making, and reporting processes used in each program.

Cancer Cause and Prevention Research Grants: CFDA 93.393

NIH operates this project grant program designed to fund research covering the identification of cancer risks, strategies to reduce cancer risk, identify causes of cancer, and develop medical methods to prevent cancer. The program includes research on epidemiology, the initiation of cancer formation (carcinogenesis), biomarkers that provide early detection warnings of cancer, immunology and the creation of vaccines, chemotherapy techniques, and organ-specific studies. Funds are available for institutes of higher education, public agencies, non-profit research institutes, and for-profit healthcare firms. Grants are awarded annually based on the proposal's scientific merit and relevance to program priorities. A panel of scientific peers and a national advisory council reviews each grant, meaning that this is a highly insulated expert review process. The average grant lasts three to four years and receives just over \$450,000. Winners are required to submit annual reports on use of funds and progress, as well as a final report at the conclusion of the grant. Approximately 15 percent of applications are funded.

Education and Human Resources (Ehr) Grants: CFDA 47.076

The National Science Foundation (NSF) oversees this grant program, called EHR, which provides funding for education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Through these grants, NSF provides scholarships and fellowships for STEM students from pre-Kindergarten to post-doctoral programs. In addition, grants are used to ensure that STEM topics are included in curricula, and provided with adequate resources. Overall, the grant program is designed to ensure that the U.S. education system has access to STEM funding for necessary infrastructure and is producing a sufficient capacity of trained students to serve as teachers and researchers. Funds are available for universities and colleges, non-profit organizations, for profit organizations, state and local governments, and individual citizens. Grant proposals are reviewed by NSF staff who are assisted by STEM experts and other external reviewers deemed experts in the field. The result is a review process that is both administrative and expert-led. Grants are reviewed annually and have durations of up to five years. On average, each grant is worth \$260,000. Winners are required to submit annual progress reports and a final report upon the conclusion of the grant, as well as quarterly financial

reports. Approximately 20 percent of applications are funded.

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (Gear-Up) Grants: CFDA 84.334

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) uses the GEAR-UP program to enter into partnerships to help disadvantaged students graduate from high school and access post-secondary education. Funding is used for tutoring and mentoring programs, academic and career counseling, programs designed to encourage parental engagement, and educational programs on post-secondary programs (including campus visits and financial literacy). Grants are awarded to either states or educational consortia consisting of local educational organizations partnering with institutions of higher learning (including community colleges and technical schools). Applications are reviewed annually by panels of peers from public and private educational institutions and government agencies. The program requires matching funds from recipients, and much of the grant funding is dispersed to individual citizens in the form of cash assistance or scholarships. Grants last six to seven years and have an average value of \$1.8 million. Annual reporting of finances and progress are required.

Homeland Security Grant Program: CFDA 97.067

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operates the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP), a categorical grant designed to improve emergency preparedness in states and urban areas. The program prioritizes building core emergency management capabilities including communication, training, and protection of critical infrastructure. Funds are dispersed according to a formula that ensures each state receives 0.35 percent of the total funding. Administrators then review state applications to determine how to disperse remaining funds, prioritizing projects based on risk likelihood and the anticipated effectiveness of the proposed projects. State, local, and tribal governments are eligible, and in some cases serve as pass-through organizations for lower levels of government. Slightly more than \$1 billion is distributed annually through this program, with state-level awards averaging around \$19 million. Grants last for three years, and DHS employees regularly conduct site visits or request documentation from fund recipients. Progress and financial reports are required quarterly.

Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project: CFDA 17.805

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) offers this grant program to help homeless veterans find work and reduce this group's homelessness through job training, housing, and mental illness treatment. State and local workforce investment boards, other state and local government agencies, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, and for-

profit entities are eligible to apply for funds which must be used to specifically aid homeless veterans. The money is generally used *en masse* to subsidize service provision and training instead of being distributed to individual homeless veterans. Applications are reviewed annually by public administrators in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training and the Department of Labor. Approximately \$35-40 million is spent annually on this program, with an average grant value of \$230,000. Grant administrators require quarterly reporting of both program and financial information.

Outdoor Recreation: Acquisition, Development, and Planning Grants: CFDA 15.916

The Department of the Interior (DOI) administers this grant program, designed to provide state and local governments the resources necessary to create Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs) and to purchase and develop real estate and facilities for outdoor recreation. This includes funding for both the administrative development of the plan, which involves hiring and contracting out, as well as the acquisition and improvement of real property, such as parks, campgrounds, athletic facilities, and associated infrastructure needs. States and tribes are eligible to apply for these grants, and may serve as a pass-through for subsidiary governments. A large portion of these funds are allocated based on statutory formula, ensuring that each state receives funding for this type of activity. Federal funds must make up less than 50 percent of the total investment, meaning that eligible states are forced to find matching funds (though in some instances, block grant funds from other programs can be used). The remaining funds are apportioned based on need. For these grants, National Park Service (NPS) field offices review proposals and make final determination over applications within their regions. Grants are made annually and last three years, with an average value of around \$200,000. Consolidated performance and financial reports are required annually.

Public Safety Partnership and Community Policing Grants: CFDA 16.710

The U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) uses this grant program, called COPS, to provide funding for community oriented policing initiatives. Community oriented policing practices are those focused on crime prevention, problem-solving, community engagement, and responsiveness. These programs differ from traditional, reactive law enforcement practices that stress intervention following criminal activity. Money is used for training, collaborative initiatives between law enforcement and community groups, and to support evidence-based law enforcement practices. State, local, and tribal governments are eligible along with networked law enforcement consortia (to include nonprofit and for-profit organizations). USDOJ officials review and select winning applications, indicating an administrative selection process. Grants are available

annually, lasting from one to three years with an average value of \$640,000. Progress reports are required annually, though USDOJ expects quarterly financial reports.

Surveys, Studies, and Research Relating to the Clean Air Act: CFDA 66.034

Overseen by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), this grant program funds research into the causes, effects, extent, prevention, and control of air pollution. This includes studies of air quality, acid rain, climate change, community engagement, and emissions reduction techniques. The grant program stresses that each research initiative needs to have an environmental justice component focused on inequitable impacts of pollution and strategies to involve people from all backgrounds (particularly historically disadvantaged groups). The agency alters funding priorities

slightly each year. Most recently, the program focused on initiatives related to indoor pollutants, climate change, the development of climate protection partnerships, sustainable transportation, and green supply chain development. Funds are available to state, local, and tribal governments, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), institutions of higher education, hospitals, laboratories, and nonprofit research organizations. Eligibility may be predetermined based on technical qualifications (competition might not be full and open, but rather after exclusion of certain organizations). EPA officials review applications using established administrative procedures outlined in each annual grant announcement. Matching may be required in specific instances. Grants last from one to five years and have an average value of \$150,000. Progress and financial reports are required quarterly.