



SHORT ARTICLE

Presidential Particularism and Mayoral Elections

Heonuk Ha¹  and Jeffery A. Jenkins² 

¹University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA and ²University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA
Corresponding author: Jeffery Jenkins; Email: jenkinja@usc.edu

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Abstract

Amid the growing trend of political polarization and nationalization of US politics, the link between federal and local governments has become increasingly significant in the American public policy process. Consequently, the president, as party leader, has increasingly supported co-partisan candidates, not only in federal elections but also in subnational ones. Incorporating 1,124 contested partisan local elections for 399 cities with populations exceeding 50,000 between 2005 and 2020, we investigate how the president strategically employs federal funds to assist co-partisan mayoral candidates. Using two-way fixed effects models, we find that the president distributes more block and project grants to swing cities with co-partisan mayors during mayoral election years. We do not find that the president disproportionately allocates grants to co-partisan mayors in swing cities during non-mayoral election years; instead, jurisdictions are rewarded irrespective of their electoral value.

Keywords: mayoral elections; federal grants; presidential particularism

Introduction

American federal and sub-national governments strategically interact with one another in the public policy process, in order to enhance their political and policy benefits. For example, the federal government delegates a significant portion of its policy implementation to sub-national governments, necessitating the president and federal agencies to seek support from state and local governments for successful policy enforcement (McCann 2016). Policy outcomes are significantly influenced by executive partisanship, making party alignment among different government levels vital in an increasingly polarized era. Although the president, governors, and mayors each have their distinct interests and strategies in the public policy process, previous research has focused primarily on either the federal–state or state–local relationship.

Scholars of distributive politics suggest that both the president and Congress pursue their electoral and policy benefits by selectively distributing federal funds to co-partisan jurisdictions (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010; Dynes and Huber 2015;

Ha and Jenkins 2024b; Kriner and Reeves 2015a). Research on the presidency has focused mainly on the president's particularistic behavior to core-support and swing jurisdictions, during both federal election and non-election years. This work, however, has not extensively examined the complexities of the president's electoral particularism, such as the impact of party alignment between the president and subnational government executives, particularly the relationship between the president and mayors.

Although local politics and policies are more distant from federal issues and influenced more by state governments than the federal government, the federal–local relationship has become increasingly important to local politicians. Local politics and elections have traditionally been seen as somewhat removed from national and state issues, accompanied by low voter turnout (de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* 2023; Warshaw 2019). However, recent studies suggest that local elections have become increasingly nationalized, with a greater emphasis on partisanship and ideology (Amlani and Algara 2021; Warshaw 2019). While Hudak (2014) examined the president's particularism vis-à-vis gubernatorial elections, studies making a similar connection to local elections have not emerged.

To fill this gap, we examine how the president allocates federal funds to local governments during mayoral election years, employing two-way fixed effects models and data from 1,124 mayoral elections across 399 cities from 2005 to 2020. We investigate the president's electoral particularism – specifically, the distribution of federal block and project grants – toward co-partisan mayors in cities with highly contested elections.¹ Brollo and Nannicini (2012) show how the president strategically aids swing cities with co-partisan mayors to enhance their election prospects in Brazil. We apply this same logic to the US case.

Case

Federal politicians have increasingly engaged in local elections, propelled by the escalating nationalization and polarization of politics, in both direct and indirect ways. For example, the president has strategically employed federal funds to assist co-partisan mayoral candidates, providing selective spending benefits to swing cities. In 2014, the city of Lexington (KY) procured a \$15 million federal grant for the Taxiway Safety Enhancement Program from the Federal Aviation Administration, shortly before a competitive mayoral election.² In 2016, Maricopa County's (AZ) public transit project received a \$75 million grant from the Federal Transit Administration, with a substantial portion of this fund allocated to the city of Tempe, which was in the throes of a mayoral election.³ In 2019, just a few months before the 2020 mayoral election, a politically contentious city, Fresno (CA), received a \$10.5 million BUILD grant from the Department of Transportation.⁴

¹We discuss this in more depth below, but following Kriner and Reeves (2015a), we classify swing cities as those in which the vote margin between the top two candidates in the last mayoral election was less than 10 percentage points.

²Blue Grass Airport gets federal funding: <https://www.lanereport.com/37983/2014/09/blue-grass-airport-gets-federal-funding-for-taxiway-safety-enhancement-program/>

³Tempe seeks to boost the appeal of planned streetcars: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/tempe/2016/08/25/tempe-seeks-boost-appeal-planned-streetcars-add-public-art-stops/88764728/>

⁴Veterans Boulevard construction appears to be fully funded as the city of Fresno secures a \$10.5 million federal grant: <https://abc30.com/veterans-boulevard-fresno/5676943/>

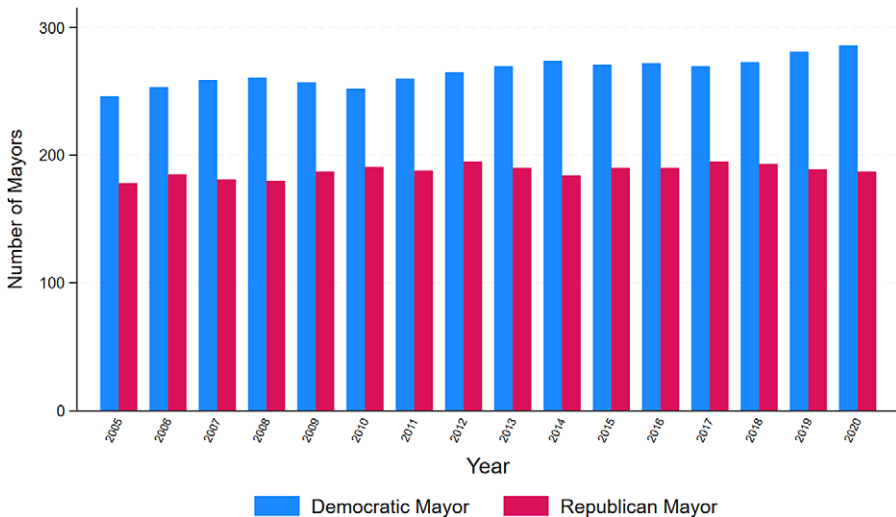


Figure 1. Mayor's Partisanship by Year (2005–2020).

Source: de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) dataset.

These examples provide some face validity for our general research inquiry – that the president and federal agencies strategically allocate federal funds not just to co-partisan incumbents in congressional elections but also to co-partisan mayors in electorally contested (“swing”) cities during mayoral election years.

Background

In the US, local elections are held throughout the year under various rules and systems. Elected officials might also be partisan or nonpartisan. Within the de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) dataset of 549 large and medium-sized cities (populations exceeding 50,000), around 270 Democratic mayors and 200 Republican mayors are represented, as shown in Figure 1.⁵ The remainder hold no party affiliation. This variation in mayoral partisanship has ramifications for local policy outcomes and fiscal priorities. Additionally, party alignment with the president can affect federal policy implementation at the local level.

Local elections

Numerous local elections, particularly mayoral elections, are conducted every four years in sync with presidential election years. However, mayoral term lengths and term limits vary according to local election rules: 45% of local governments stipulate a four-year mayoral term, and 85% of cities enforce either two or three mayoral term limits (Moulder 2008).⁶ Among our sample of 549 cities, over 100 mayoral elections

⁵In this research, we include cities for which party information is available for both the mayor and the runner-up from the de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) original dataset. de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) determine the mayor's partisanship from the official election source in the case of partisan elections, while they infer the partisanship from various supplementary resources for cities with non-partisan elections.

⁶Mayor's term: <https://www.nlc.org/resource/mayors-term/>

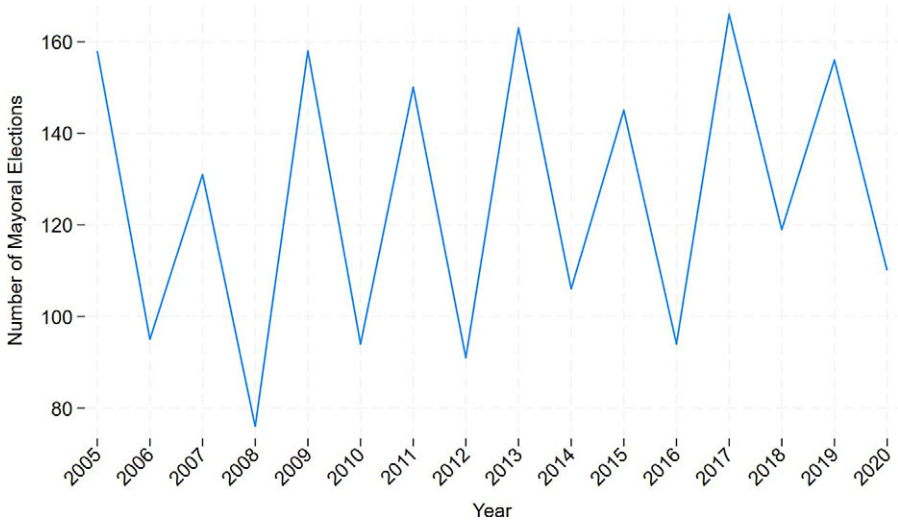


Figure 2. Mayoral Elections by Year (2005–2020).
 Source: de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) dataset.

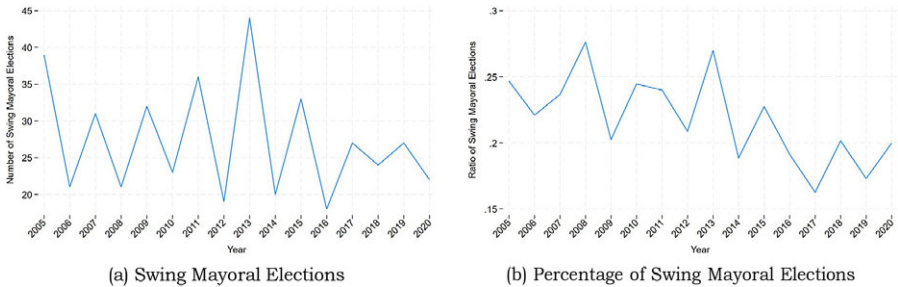


Figure 3. Swing Mayoral Elections and Ratio by Year.
 Source: de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) dataset.

occur annually, with more taking place during non-presidential election years, as shown in Figure 2.

Between 20 and 40 “swing mayoral elections” occur annually (Moulder 2008), representing approximately 22% of all mayoral elections, as illustrated in Figure 3. In the analysis, we follow Kriner and Reeves’s (2015a) criteria for defining a swing election: those with a vote margin of less than 10 percentage points between the top two candidates in the last mayoral election.

Federal grant allocation to cities

While a considerable proportion of federal grants to local governments are funneled through state governments, many are allocated directly to local governments. Additionally, the federal government retains substantial discretion over the allocation of block and project grants. However, no prior research has delved into the timing of the federal grant allocation.

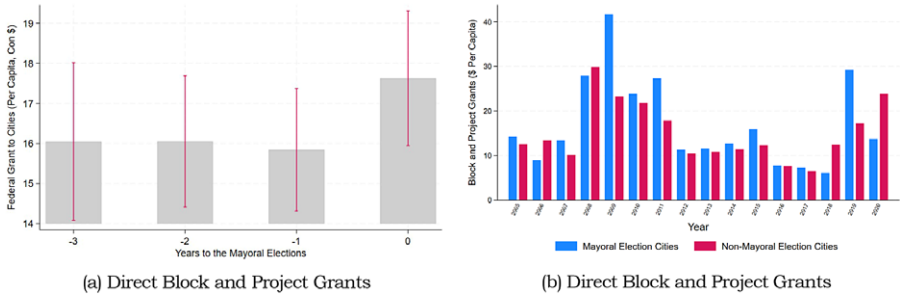


Figure 4. Federal Grants to Cities by Election Years (FY2006–2021).
 Source: de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) dataset.

As shown in Figure 4a, there is a significant increase in the allocation of federal block and project grants during mayoral election years, with the upswing led by transportation and education grants (see Figure A.2 in the Appendix). Figure 4b provides a breakdown by year and shows that cities hosting mayoral elections almost always receive a greater amount of federal block and project grants per capita compared to cities without such elections.

Related literature

Nationalization

US politics have become increasingly polarized and nationalized in recent years. Scholars have found that subnational elections are significantly influenced by national issues and partisanship, with national partisanship increasingly playing a role in both voters' choices on local issues and candidates' campaign statements and platforms (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2023).⁷ For example, Rogers (2016) demonstrates that both elites and voters consider the president's party affiliation when voting for state legislators. Similarly, Knotts and Ragusa (2016) argue that, along with candidate and district characteristics, presidential approval is a predictive factor in special elections for the US House of Representatives. Hopkins (2018) and Sievert and McKee (2019) show that since 1970, presidential election outcomes have significantly influenced state-level elections, including senatorial and gubernatorial contests. Melusky and Richman (2020) highlight the increasing trend of nationalization in state legislative elections, particularly evident in 2018, and show that voter decisions are largely influenced by support for or opposition to national political parties. Similar increasing nationalization results have also been found with regard to other state-level elections, such as state supreme court and state school superintendent elections (Weinschenk *et al.* 2021; Weinschenk 2022).

There is considerably less scholarly work investigating nationalization and elections below the state level. The most prominent studies focus on school board

⁷Until recently, research on American elections focused primarily on the national and state levels, treating local elections as somewhat separate. The belief was that local elections were influenced by local issues, with citizens demonstrating less interest. See Warshaw (2019) for a thorough overview of local elections and representation.

elections, where scholars find that large national donors from 2008 to 2013 played a significant role in determining school board elections in Los Angeles (CA), New Orleans (LA), Denver (CO), and Bridgeport (CT) (Reckhow *et al.* 2017) and recent national forces (like Critical Race Theory and COVID response) impacted school board elections in heavily Republican (Trump) areas in Wisconsin (Shah, Weinschenk, and Yiannias 2024). Research on nationalization and mayoral elections, by comparison, has been nonexistent. The closest study is by Das *et al.* (2022), which examines political rhetoric used by mayors (via Twitter) and finds local rather than national politics to be the primary focus.

Distributive politics

Federal funds represent a critical distributive resource for political actors, with both the president and members of Congress (MCs) strategically allocating federal grants to subnational governments to procure political advantages. With respect to the president, scholars find that the chief executive acts as party leader, by providing selective benefits to same-party MCs or governors to enhance their electoral advantages (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010; Hudak 2014; Kriner and Reeves 2015a; Lowande, Jenkins, and Clarke 2018). The allocation of these selective benefits is also often strategic. For example, Kriner and Reeves (2015a) and Lowande, Jenkins, and Clarke (2018) show that the president allocates more federal funds and trade protections, respectively, during presidential election years, displaying an amplified electoral particularism towards swing jurisdictions. Duchin and Hackney (2021) and Ha (2023) also uncover evidence of presidential favoritism towards swing states in the allocation of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans during election and nonelection years.

Previous research, however, has focused almost exclusively on federal relationships with states or congressional districts, overlooking federal-local dynamics on the distribution of federal selective benefits. Only Brollo and Nannicini (2012) – in a study of Brazil – examine the effects of federal-local relationships on federal fund allocation to municipalities. They find that the Brazilian president supports same-party mayors by selectively allocating federal funds, with this favoritism peaking during the first two years following mayoral elections. Whether this finding might extend to the United States is unclear, as the US president's electoral motivations in local elections remain an open question.

Theoretical expectations

To summarize, we focus on the president's electoral particularism, specifically whether the president targets with increased grant funding co-partisan mayors in swing cities during local election years. Building on recent work, we expect the president to act as a party leader and thus pursue electoral particularism vis-a-vis co-partisan mayors during election years. Unpacking this, we believe the president's electoral particularism – in the form of increased grant funding during election years with respect to timing – is *strategic*; it is deployed where it will have *maximum effect*. During mayoral election years, the president will target co-partisan mayors in elections expected to be close – and thus could *swing* either way – so as to increase the probability of keeping that city in the president's party column. In non-mayoral election years, these strategic considerations are considerably weaker, as there are

strong incentives to reward jurisdictions irrespective of their electoral value (Kriner and Reeves 2015a, 2015b; Lowande, Jenkins, and Clarke 2018).

We thus propose two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: During mayoral election years, the president allocates more grant funds to highly-contested (i.e., swing) cities governed by co-partisan mayors relative to non-highly-contested (i.e., non-swing) cities governed by co-partisan mayors.

Hypothesis 2: During non-mayoral election years, the president does not allocate more grant funds to highly-contested (i.e., swing) cities governed by co-partisan mayors relative to non-highly-contested (i.e., non-swing) cities governed by co-partisan mayors.

Data, variables, and estimation

We employ two main datasets in our analysis. The first was created by de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) and provides extensive information for various local elections between 2005 and 2020. Of the 549 cities with populations over 50,000, we include only 465 cities in the analysis that have financial information from USAspending.gov and other socioeconomic data. Additionally, cities with elections in which both candidates were from the same party are excluded from the analysis. As a result, we examine 1,124 mayoral elections in 399 cities over a 16-year period.

The second is the federal grants data from the *Federal Assistance Awards Data System (FAADS)*, which has been the standard in previous grants research (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010; Dynes and Huber 2015; Kriner and Reeves 2015a; Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa 2006). As the federal government wields discretionary authority in allocating block and project grants, we only consider these two types of federal grants distributed directly (exclusively) to cities.

Our dependent variable captures federal-to-city block and project grants from 2005 through 2020. We employ per-capita federal grants by city, using 2012 real dollar values⁸; this stratification eliminates data skewness resulting from cities that did not receive any grants.

Our independent variables probe the president's election strategy to support co-partisan candidates in swing cities during mayoral election years.⁹ To identify a swing city, we focus on the vote total in the *last* mayoral election:

Swing city: Coded 1 if the margin in the previous mayoral election is less than 10 percentage points – per Kriner and Reeves (2015a) – and 0 otherwise.¹⁰

Previous research has employed the average of the past three election outcomes to define swing. However, given irregular mayoral election cycles and the trend toward electoral polarization, we only consider the most recent election.

We measure party alignment in two ways:

⁸When we initially downloaded the fiscal dataset in 2022, the 2012 dollar value index (base year = 100) was used by the OMB's budget data and the Federal Reserve's financial data to calculate the real value. Although the base year serves as the reference point for the index, we expect minimal difference between using real or current dollar values in this research due to the narrow time window, which limits the impact of inflation.

⁹Summary statistics for all variables appear in the [Appendix \(Table B.1\)](#).

¹⁰Here we take into account the vote-share margin between the top two candidates, using the total vote as the denominator.

Pres-mayor party: Coded 1 if the president and mayor are from the same party, and 0 otherwise.

Pres-gov-mayor party: Coded 1 if the president, governor, and mayor are from the same party, and 0 otherwise.

The two co-partisan variables tap related things. The first focuses simply on the partisan relationship between the president and mayor. The second focuses on the partisan relationship between the president, governor, and mayor. Keeping a co-partisan city in the president's column is important; keeping a co-partisan city in a *co-partisan state* in the president's column may be even more important. We use partisan and electoral information from the previous mayoral election during the current election because the president considers particularistic allocations based on the prior election's results.

Following Kriner and Reeves (2015a), we also incorporate three socioeconomic variables as controls. These variables, which tap forces that also affect federal grant allocation, include *Tot pop (logged)*, the logged value of a city's total population; *Income PC (logged)*, the logged amount of income per capita by city; and *Pov rate*, the city's poverty rate.¹¹

We employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with two-way fixed effects (city and year) to estimate first the president's electoral particularism in the distribution of federal grant funds to swing election cities during mayoral election years.

$$Fed_Grant(per_cap)_{c,t} = \beta_0 + \alpha_c + \delta_t + \beta_1 PartyAlign_{c,t} + \beta_2 SwingCity_{c,t} + \beta_3 PartyAlign_{c,t} * SwingCity_{c,t} + \mathbf{X}\Psi_{c,t} + \epsilon_{c,t}, \quad (1)$$

We examine the president's strategic allocation of federal funds to cities, with a focus on (1) the simple alignment of the president and mayor's party (2) and the party alignment among the president, governor, and mayor. We interact each type of party alignment with the swing city variable to identify the president's electoral particularism vis-à-vis co-partisan candidates in swing versus non-swing cities during mayoral and non-mayoral election years.

We employ city and year-fixed effects with city-level clustered standard errors, to control for city-specific and time-invariant factors.

Results

We perform analyses separately for mayoral election years and non-mayoral election years, as presented in Tables 1 and 2.

As Table 1 illustrates, we find support for **Hypothesis 1**: There is significant evidence that the president disproportionately allocates grants to co-partisan mayors in swing cities during mayoral election years. As the interaction terms in columns 1 and 2 suggest, co-partisan mayors from swing cities receive \$9.913 (per capita)

¹¹These data come from the American Community Survey (ACS) dataset, covering the period from 2005 to 2020. As the 2005 ACS dataset is not available, we substitute it with the 2006 dataset.

Table 1. Federal grants to swing cities during mayoral election years

	(1)	(2)
	Federal grants PC (con \$)	Federal grants PC (con \$)
Swing city	−0.923 (3.583)	0.297 (3.298)
Pres-mayor party	−2.893 (2.561)	
Swing city * pres-mayor-party	9.913** (4.923)	
Pres-gov-mayor party		1.816 (2.923)
Swing city * pres-gov-mayor-party		14.83* (8.074)
Total pop (logged)	39.26 (37.84)	35.08 (38.30)
Income PC (logged)	60.27 (47.20)	60.05 (46.92)
Poverty rate	181.8 (147.0)	187.5 (147.6)
Constant	−1,073 (833.8)	−1,025 (836.6)
Observations	1,124	1,124
R-squared	0.096	0.102
Number of cities	399	399
City FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$

** $p < 0.05$

*** $p < 0.01$

Note. Clustered standard errors at city level.

Table 2. Federal grants to swing cities during non-mayoral election years

	(1)	(2)
	Federal grants PC (con \$)	Federal grants PC (con \$)
Swing city	−2.361 (4.159)	−2.007 (3.273)
Pres-mayor party	−2.048 (1.625)	
Swing city * pres-mayor party	1.956 (3.846)	
Pres-gov-mayor party		−0.547 (2.145)
Swing city * pres-gov-mayor party		2.184 (3.721)
Total pop (logged)	1.353 (23.89)	0.105 (24.11)
Income PC (logged)	−57.56 (49.54)	−56.52 (48.85)
Poverty rate	−74.40 (94.21)	−70.31 (93.46)
Constant	578.0 (734.6)	581.2 (731.0)
Observations	3,274	3,274
R-squared	0.027	0.027

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	(1)	(2)
	Federal grants PC (con \$)	Federal grants PC (con \$)
Number of cities	456	456
City FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$

** $p < 0.05$

*** $p < 0.01$

Note. Clustered standard errors at the city level.

more in federal grants than co-partisan mayors from non-swing cities. And the effect size becomes even more pronounced when the governor also belongs to the president's party, as co-partisan mayors from swing cities receive \$14.83 (per capita) more in federal grants than their non-swing counterparts. These are considerable amounts: an additional \$9.913 and \$14.83 (per capita) more in grant funds represents a 0.262 and 0.392 standard deviation increase, respectively.¹²

As noted, we define a city as a swing city based on the vote margin from the previous election: less than 10 percentage points. Following Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010), we also use a 5 percentage point threshold to define a *close election*; the results are presented in Table B.3 in the Appendix. Although the effect size is larger when using a 5 percentage point threshold, it is not statistically significant, possibly due to the smaller sample size for alignment between the president, (governor), and mayor across party lines.

Finally, as Table 2 illustrates, we also find support for **Hypothesis 2**: There is no evidence that the president disproportionately allocates grants to co-partisan mayors in swing cities during non-mayoral election years. The coefficients on the interaction terms (in columns 1 and 2) are positive but are nominally small and ultimately not significantly different from zero.

Conclusion

As politics in the US have polarized and nationalized in recent years, the partisanship of executives at each level of government has mattered for policy. To this point, scholars have mostly examined the partisan effects of the president or governors on policy outcomes at the federal or state level. The importance of the federal–local relationship, by comparison, has not received much attention.

We explore this federal–local relationship by investigating the president's particularism in targeting swing cities to support co-partisan mayoral candidates during election years. We find that the president distributes a significantly larger amount of block and project grants to swing cities with co-partisan mayors during mayoral election years. The same is not true during non-mayoral-election years when the president

¹²Although we exclude same-party elections from our analysis, including them yields results that are consistent with our main findings in terms of magnitude and statistical significance. The results incorporating same-party elections are presented in Table B.2.

allocates block and project grants more evenly across jurisdictions (irrespective of their electoral value).

Although local elections have traditionally received less attention than federal or state elections due to low voter turnout – a potential limitation of this study – this research makes several significant contributions within the context of the increasing nationalization and polarization of US local politics. We contribute to the study of distributive politics and US elections by providing evidence for the president's electoral particularism vis-à-vis co-partisan candidates in local elections. As our work focuses specifically on mayors, future research can extend these findings by using de Benedictis-Kessner *et al.* (2023) dataset, which includes extensive information on other local elections, like city council, county executive, county legislature, sheriff, prosecutor, and school board. Finally, our findings deal only with federal spending (grant) allocation and thus do not consider other policy areas. Scholars thus might examine, for examine, regulatory policy, which often requires strong federal and local relationships for successful policy design and implementation.¹³

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2024.32>.

Data availability statement. Replication materials are available on SPPQ Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/TIEMMG> (Ha and Jenkins 2024a).

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¹³Fox (2020), for example, notes the importance of strong ties between federal and local governments in environmental policymaking.

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Author biographies. Heonuk Ha is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Jeffery A. Jenkins is Provost Professor of Public Policy, Political Science, and Law; Maria B. Crutcher Professor of Citizenship and Democratic Values; and Director of the Political Institutions and Political Economy (PIPE) Collaborative at the Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California.

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