



**POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND GOVERNANCE**

*Series Editors:* Dan Hough · Paul M. Heywood



# The Politics of Public Spending

Actors, Motivations, and Public Responses

Peter Spáč · Petr Voda · Michal Tóth  
Miroslav Nemčok · Lenka Hrbková

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# Political Corruption and Governance

## Series Editors

Dan Hough, University of Sussex, Ascot, UK

Paul M. Heywood, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

This series aims to analyse the nature and scope of, as well as possible remedies for, political corruption. The rise to prominence over the last 20 years of corruption-related problems and of the ‘good governance’ agenda as the principal means to tackle them has led to the development of a plethora of (national and international) policy proposals, international agreements and anti-corruption programmes and initiatives. National governments, international organisations and NGOs all now claim to take very seriously the need to tackle issues of corruption. It is thus unsurprising that over couple of decades, a significant body of work with a wide and varied focus has been published in academic journals and in international discussion papers. This series seeks to provide a forum through which to address this growing body of literature. It invites not just in-depth single country analyses of corruption and attempts to combat it, but also comparative studies that explore the experiences of different states (or regions) in dealing with different types of corruption. We also invite monographs that take an overtly thematic focus, analysing trends and developments in one type of corruption across either time or space, as well as theoretically informed analysis of discrete events.

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Peter Spáč  
Nitra, Slovakia

Petr Voda  
Skalice nad Svitavou, Czech Republic

Michal Tóth  
Svit, Slovakia

Miroslav Nemčok  
Oslo, Norway

Lenka Hrbková  
Brno, Czech Republic

Czech Science Foundation

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## Introduction

Until 2009, the lower chamber of the Czech Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, practiced an annual tradition of earmarking when discussing the state budget. MPs used this opportunity to exercise their influence and assign state funding to specific regions of their interest. Among those who succeeded in this effort were primarily members of the parliamentary Committee on the Budget, while other MPs had to struggle to pull strings so that other legislators would support their causes. Although the MPs expressed ambitious financial goals, the final result of earmarking had to be fiscally neutral given that the overall income and expenditures of the budget were already approved and further change was out of the question. To help this game run, the Ministry of Finance, which prepared the annual budget proposal, often overestimated the proposed expenditures so that MPs could find opportunities to funnel money to localities they aimed to support. After 2009, this earmarking tradition in the Czech Parliament came to a close, probably due to widespread criticism of such practices and the need for substantial cuts and austerity measures in response to the financial crisis at that time. However, the change was rather formal than real. In subsequent years the earmarks were substituted by grants distributed by the ministries of the central government. In other words, while the playground had changed, the rules and strategies remained largely untouched (cf. Hána 2013).

Before the 2016 general elections in Slovakia, a group of researchers conducted a series of focus groups with citizens and voters (Baboš et al. 2016). The main aim was to perform an in-depth analysis of how voters were evaluating various political, social, and economic issues before the upcoming elections. One of the topics the participants of the focus groups discussed was corruption and its impact. The results revealed an interesting story. In general, the participants condemned any sign of ‘high level’ corruption, i.e., corrupt behaviour on the national level such as unlawful use of public resources or misuse of public tenders to provide benefits to the sponsors of political parties. On the other hand, after switching the topic to political patronage and corruption at the local level, the tone of the participants changed. Although they still disagreed with such practices from a moral perspective, they appreciated these practices by local governments, providing they led to either individual benefits for the participants or they were beneficial for the whole local area. Direct experience with receiving benefits thus triggered a positive evaluation of such biased spending, despite its generally maligned character.

What these two examples have in common, is public spending. After winning elections, candidates become elected officials, political parties obtain seats, they form governments and in doing so they gain formal political power. In particular, by mobilising enough voters and gaining their support, political parties gain access to a large number of public offices that include control over the distribution of public resources. A large and still growing amount of literature shows that elected officials use public money to promote their political interests and sway voters’ preferences (Carozzi and Repetto 2016; Dahlberg and Johansson 2002; Schraff 2014; Tavits 2009). Although pork-barrelling might take various forms, may arise for different reasons, and use many different strategies, it has developed into a formidable tool that incumbents have at their disposal.

The mechanism of pork-barrel politics includes several types of actors. First, a central authority executing control over the allocation of public funds that funnels resources to selected geographical territories. Based on the political and institutional conditions, as described in Chapter 2, this is typically done either to reward elected officials for their support of certain legislation or to bolster co-partisans at lower territorial levels. Hence, the second set of actors is the elected representatives whose constituencies benefit from such distribution. Finally, in the chain of pork-barrel politics the third group of actors is the people who are expected to appreciate the benefits channelled to their towns and regions and express their gratitude

in elections. Without the public playing its expected role, pork-barrelling degenerates into the sole allocation of resources without achieving its full goals. For this reason, it is essential to understand the link between the delivery of material benefits and the response of the public to such mechanisms.

In this book, we examine the politically biased distribution of public resources in two countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the public response to such spending. We understand the phenomenon of pork-barrel politics in a complex way, which influences our ambitions for this study. We aim to achieve two main goals. First, the literature has already described pork-barrel patterns in public spending, although most scholars have focussed on advanced democracies such as the US, Canada, and Western Europe. However, we aim to contribute with evidence from countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), confirming that pork-barrel politics is carried out in the ‘new’ and seemingly consolidated democracies, too. Second, we concentrate on an issue that is largely underdeveloped in the existing understanding of pork-barrel politics, the public response to such biased allocation of public funds. We employ an approach that allows us to show how the public responds to various strategies of public resources distribution in terms of the character of the process, its outcomes, and the framing of the beneficiaries. Employing such a broad approach, we demonstrate that pork-barrel patterns in distributive politics are perceived differently by local voters and this relationship is shaped by the character of the information spread among the public. Importantly, we find that under certain conditions, receiving benefits is associated with lower incentives to turn away from the responsible decision-makers, and voters increasingly turn a blind eye to politicians if they share (minority) ethnic identity. Finally, we also give attention to how pork-barrelling impacts political trust as the key linkage between the people and their political representatives. We are interested in whether the politically biased allocation of resources erodes this link between the voters and the elites. Such an analysis is highly important given the general democratic backsliding in the CEE region.

The book will provide benefits to its audience in several ways. First, it adds depth to our understanding of the relevant topic of the distribution of public money and the political and societal implications of contemporary policy-making practices. Second, the selection of two countries from the CEE region fills a gap in the literature and makes the book the only one on the market to provide such an analysis. Third, the data analysis is

based on a sophisticated methodology that enriches its findings. Fourth, besides open data used for the analysis of grant allocation and survey data for the study of political trust, a significant part of the book rests on original data obtained through a series of population experiments. In sum, the book offers a valuable and unique contribution based on innovative approaches with important implications for a wide audience.

## OTHER STUDIES AND CASE SELECTION

Our book provides a comprehensive analysis of public spending and its political and societal implications and focusses on the case studies of two CEE countries. As such, the book is unique and is the first in the field to do so. The topic of politically biased distribution of public resources is well covered by other authors but their focus is rather limited in a geographic sense. Books on this topic deal primarily with the case of the US (Evans 2004; Frisch 1998; Hudak 2014; Sidman 2019). They concentrate on the US institutional setting and the roles of the president and congress in public spending and the electoral returns of such actions and strategies.

Our book also differs from the literature on clientelism. Given that pork-barrel politics is a non-programmatic way of distributing public money that does not enforce compliance among voters (c.f. Stokes et al. 2013), we do not focus on the vote-buying activities of elites vis-a-vis individual citizens, which might be considered beyond legal bounds. Such activities have been mapped by authors who typically deal with new democracies or developing countries (Chandra 2004; Hilgers 2012). These books map a set of activities of political elites that usually occur at the micro level, for instance, the provision of public offices to selected citizens or the creation of personal networks to provide material benefits to individuals who, in return, are expected to support the respective political parties and their candidates. Contrary to this, we concentrate on the centralised distribution of public money that occurs at the macro level and provides aggregate benefits to entire localities without any further mechanisms controlling for the behaviour of citizens.

Concerning clientelism in the CEE region, Mares and Young (2009) published their book on Romania and Hungary. Besides the selection of the analysed countries, our book differs in several important aspects from their text. First, Mares and Young primarily analyse the electoral strategies of local political representatives that might be perceived as semi-legal or



simply illegal. Their focus is on local elites who use various incentives and means of coercion to bias the behaviour of voters, such as threats, policy favours, bribes, and monetary sanctions. On the contrary, in our book, we concentrate on the distribution of public money according to legal standards. We analyse large funds that operate at the regional, national, and EU levels. Second, Mares and Young mainly study how local elites provide individual benefits to voters or threaten their access to similar gains. Our book focusses on the distribution of intergovernmental grants that provide benefits, not to individual inhabitants but whole municipalities. The benefits are thus bestowed upon villages and towns without direct interaction between the elites and the citizens. Third and finally, unlike Mares and Young, we employ a different methodology with large-N datasets, and we base many of our findings on population experiments. This allows us to test various strategies of pork-barrel politics and estimate the public responses to such behaviour.

In addition to books, a large number of journal articles have been published that deal with public spending, its motivations, and consequences. The geographical coverage of these articles is also limited primarily to some regions and countries, e.g., North America, South America, Western Europe, and Australia (Bee and Moulton 2015; Carozzi and Repetto 2016; Denmark 2014; Livert and Gainza 2018; Veiga and Veiga 2013). An increasing quantity of articles has been published on the distribution of EU funds (Bloom and Petrova 2013; Bouvet and Dall’Erba 2010; Dellmuth and Stoffel 2012; Gregor 2020). None of these articles covers the Czech Republic and Slovakia in connection to transfers of EU funds to the municipal level. What is more, all the above-mentioned articles share a lack a focus on public attitudes towards the specific distribution strategies which we examine in our book. We can find no source that provides rich empirical material about civic attitudes and the societal response to public spending based on multiple experiments, working with representative samples that allow us to generalise the findings to the entire population of the country.

In our book, we focus on two CEE countries, namely the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both states share various similar characteristics. They are among the newer democracies in Europe after experiencing four decades of non-democratic regime which ended in 1989. Following the split of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992, both countries pursued intensified relations with Western Europe which translated into their entry into the EU in May 2004. From an institutional perspective, both

the Czech Republic and Slovakia are parliamentary democracies with an almost exclusive tradition of coalition governments, which stems from the proportional representation system they use for general elections. Both states are highly centralised with national governments being the most powerful political bodies. Following the establishment of democratic systems after 1989, the Czech Republic and Slovakia adopted a three-tier system of governance. More specifically, the Czech Republic is divided into 14 regions, while Slovakia consists of 8 regions. Below the regional tier is the local level, represented by municipalities. It is important to note that among European countries, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have a very fragmented municipal structure (cf. Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Ebinger et al. 2019). After 1989 the number of Czech and Slovak municipalities increased substantially, partially reversing the forced amalgamation under communist rule that frequently merged smaller villages into larger urban centres (Illner 2010; Klimovský 2015; Spáč 2021). Currently, there are 6,259 towns in the Czech Republic and 2,891 municipalities in Slovakia. Such a high number provides good conditions for a detailed analysis of public spending and the targeting of resources at the municipal level.

Besides similarities, the two countries differ primarily in the ethnic composition of their populations. While Czech society is rather ethnically homogeneous, Slovakia is an example of a multinational country. Around one-fifth of the country's population belongs to ethnic minorities, with Hungarians and Roma being the most sizeable. According to official census data, the Roma minority makes up less than two per cent of the country's population, but this number is substantially underestimated given the stigmatised image of this ethnic group and the low willingness of its members to declare their true ethnicity in surveys. In this regard, a more accurate source is the Atlas of Roma Communities research project, which collects very detailed field data on the Roma minority and its living environment. In its most recent round, published in 2019, the project estimated almost 440 thousand Roma living in Slovakia, which almost equalled the size of the Hungarian minority. Such a structure of the Slovak society allows us to expand our research in this book by adding the dimension of ethnicity to our experimental studies. In particular, we use this opportunity to enhance the featured vignettes to deepen our understanding of how shared ethnicity and the framing of the ethnic background beneficiaries affects the public response to pork-barrel politics.

## RESEARCH STRATEGY

Given the character of the book and its aims, we employ a set of quantitative approaches to perform our research. First, our ambition is to track a long record of public spending on various territorial levels, which requires working with large-N datasets and the application of appropriate statistic techniques, such as regression analysis, including multilevel modelling due to the nested nature of the data from the wide time span that we cover. Second, our book also provides innovative insight into public responses to various strategies of public spending. The existing literature in the field addresses the process of distribution of resources and its politically biased results. Given that public expenditures are funded mainly from tax revenues, we also concentrate on public attitudes and opinions regarding the politically motivated allocation of funds. We aim to identify how people evaluate the material benefits of funding in light of the fairness (or lack thereof) of the distribution process, whether popular acceptance of variations in public spending depends on the framing of the beneficiaries, and the implications of money allocation for trust in political institutions. To measure these phenomena and test these relationships we use a series of both experimental and non-experimental approaches.

The application of survey experiments is particularly important for our book. Experiments have proved to be useful in studying phenomena such as public goods distribution, corruption, and clientelism (e.g., Serra and Wantchekon 2012; Dunning and Nilekani 2013, Stokes et al. 2013) because both the difficulties of social desirability and introspection about one's motivations are obstacles to obtaining topic-relevant data in a classical survey. Second, the major advantage of the experimental method is its ability to study causality and relations between variables which are impossible to isolate in any type of observational data (Druckman et al. 2011; Morton and Williams 2010). For our purposes, we conducted a series of experiments using a selection of vignettes that allowed us to study the subject matter in a precisely calibrated detail. By using survey experiments, we were able to test scenarios that are not purely hypothetical, but which are fully realistic in terms of their application by political elites with respect to public spending, its nature, size, and framing.

An often-stressed question and challenge concerning experimental studies is whether the findings are generalisable to the broader population, beyond the sample of participants (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Due to the high costs of this type of research, scholars often use non-representative

samples, with university students being the most typical participants. A study by Mullinix et al. (2015) shows that although the results of experiments based on non-representative samples do not substantially differ from population sample experiments, this outcome might be context-dependent and the issue requires further testing. For this reason, and to promote the generalisability of our findings, we opted to conduct all of our experiments on population samples to promote the external validity of our study. In particular, we cooperated with professional survey agencies to ensure the quality of our samples. Hence, in Chapters 4 and 5, which are based on experimental data, we use only population sample experiments that allow us to generalise our findings to the entire population of each country.

The data we use comes from various sources. First of all, we use open data from public institutions concerning election results, the partisan affiliation of elected officials, and sociodemographic features of municipalities as the beneficiaries of grants. The information on public spending comes from the respective institutions. Given that not all data on delivered grants or grant requests is available publicly, we used a series of information requests to complete our dataset. Alongside that, we cite data from public surveys, namely the Eurobarometer, which is used in Chapter 6 dealing with the impact of spending on political trust. Finally, in Chapters 4 and 5, which rely on experimental studies, we collected original data from population samples.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2, we provide a theoretical overview of the politically biased distribution of public money and its implications for society. It explains how pork-barrel politics is employed in political decision-making. We summarise the main motivations for political actors to bias public spending owing to their partisan interests, and discuss normative and moral aspects of such distribution. In sum, we explain why pork-barrel distribution is capable of leading to a relevant public response given its strategies, the framing of its beneficiaries, and linkage between public representatives and society. The chapter continues by introducing our conceptual framework, and in doing so serves as an introduction to the other parts of the book. In the following chapters, we aim to break down the conceptual model into specific parts and test them empirically. This method approaches the politically biased distribution of public money as

a variety of strategies that lead to differing outcomes in society. Pork-barrel politics is thus viewed as part of a more complex phenomenon that includes the allocation of resources on one side and the public response on the other. Our main aim is to understand the tactics of distribution of public money and society's reaction, i.e., to break down the whole mechanism into specific parts and test them in the respective chapters of the book.

Chapter 3 focusses on distributive politics and its strategies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It employs a multi-layer perspective as it covers the allocation of resources from various territorial levels. More specifically, the chapter covers the distribution of resources from regional, national, and EU funding programmes. This part of the book thus tests whether and to what extent pork-barrel politics, i.e., the politically biased distribution of resources, is employed in Czechia and Slovakia. Given the aims of our book, such an analysis is essential to show that they are countries where the public might well encounter pork-barrel politics, and thus, testing the public's response to such practices is not purely hypothetical. The chapter also shows whether politically biased money distribution patterns can be discerned only at specific territorial levels or whether they exist across multiple geographical layers. This is important not only for a better understanding of the flow of public money but provides a firm link to later chapters that deal with the impact of resource distribution directed from different territorial levels.

The three remaining empirical chapters deal with the public response to various strategies of money distribution. Each chapter tests a specific aspect of our conceptual framework, with either an experimental or a non-experimental approach. Chapter 4 analyses citizens' attitudes in terms of fairness and benefits received. Procedural fairness is a basis of democratic legitimacy, in that people living in democratic political systems ought to accept even unfavourable decisions if they result from fair decision-making. On the other hand, by providing pork, political representatives aim to positively impact particular people by conferring favourable outcomes even at the expense of fairness of process (cf. Bowler et al. 2006; Esaiasson and Öhberg 2020). This problematises citizens' attitudes to procedural fairness and the provision of benefits, especially if they are in conflict. Based on a series of experiments, in Chapter 4, we study how people evaluate material benefits and also how they perceive the presence or absence of fairness in the process of resource distribution.