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Political Gold: The Australian Sports Grants Scandal

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Abstract

The partisan allocation of public funds has a long history in Australian politics. Using a unique dataset, which allows us to distinguish the merit-based component of the funding decision from the politically based component, we examine the 2018–2019 Australian sports grants scandal. We find that local funding allocations for sports infrastructure were directed disproportionately to win marginal electorates and to reward loyal supporters. However, contrary to our expectations, we find virtually no electoral impact of the grants: those electorates that received more sporting grant funding were no more likely to swing in favour of the government in the 2019 election than electorates that received no funding. A straw poll of members of the House of Representatives suggests one possible explanation as to why pork-barrelling persists: parliamentarians tend to overestimate its electoral impact.

Keywords

pork-barrel, distributive politics, targeted funding, local expenditure

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In theory, public resources should be distributed to maximise the public good. In practice, there are substantial incentives in democratic systems for governments to direct public goods to enhance their own electoral prospects. Such distributive politics, or pork-barrelling,[1] has a long history in democratic politics and has been extensively studied, especially in the United States.[2] Australia has also experienced major scandals involving the misallocation of government funds, notably involving sports grants in 1990 and 1993 (Denemark, 2000; Gaunt, 1999) and 2019. This article examines the most recent of these scandals to see whether grant allocation was politically biased and to measure the impact of grant allocation on the vote in the 2019 federal election.

The 2019 scandal has its origins in a grant programme that had been established a year earlier with the aim of distributing funds to improve sporting facilities around Australia. Public concern about the allocation of programme funds first emerged following an

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incident involving Georgina Downer, a candidate for the governing party who was attempting to oust the incumbent, an independent candidate. Downer presented a 2-metre long novelty cheque, bearing her photograph and her political party's logo, to a local sporting group. The novelty cheque, and the fact that the incumbent member was not invited to the announcement, left the false impression that the A$127,373 grant was a gift from the candidate, not a funding allocation from the federal government.[3]

The circumstances surrounding the awarding of the grant attracted controversy and following complaints, an inquiry was conducted by an independent statutory authority. At the same time a spreadsheet was leaked to the media, which appeared to show that the office of the minister responsible for the grant programme, Bridget McKenzie, had directed grants which would not otherwise have been successful to marginal electorates.[4] McKenzie subsequently resigned from her ministerial portfolio.[5] One prominent legal scholar argued that the sports grants programme contributed to 'democratic decay' because it failed to comply with the Constitution, act within legal power, comply with financial rules or meet ministerial standards (Twomey, 2021).

An unusual feature of about this grant scheme is the availability of complete data on the grant applications that were received, those that were awarded and the evaluation they received from the government department administering the process. In contrast, previous studies have typically only had access to data on the grants that were awarded. Our study is an advance on previous research by being able to distinguish between grants that were awarded based on merit from those that were awarded due to political interference.[6] By contrast, past studies on political pork-barrelling have often had to infer the partisan component of grant allocation. This necessarily involves a degree of imprecision that our unique dataset allows us to avoid.[7]

Pork-barrelling politicians might know what a merit-based allocation of funding would have looked like. But this information is typically unavailable to researchers. In our case, the leak of a key internal document – which was then placed into the public arena by being incorporated into the Hansard record of parliamentary debates – provides a precise measure of the merit of each grant and therefore allows us to know precisely how partisanship skewed the allocation of grant funding. Analysing these data, we find that a majority of the grants that were awarded did not meet the merit criteria for funding. Successful grants were disproportionately directed to marginal electorates, while the junior party in the governing coalition – the Nationals – derived particular benefit from the process. Estimating the effect of grants on the swing that the government received in the subsequent election, we find that the effect is a precisely estimated zero. A straw poll of Australian parliamentarians suggests that they tend to believe that the effect of pork-barrelling is larger than the social science literature suggests.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section examines the theory and previous literature on distributive politics and highlights where Australia fits within this work. The second section covers prior research, with reference to two earlier scandals involving sporting grants in 1990 and 1993, and outlines the background to the 2018–2019 sports grants scheme. The third section uses the internal departmental spreadsheet (now in the public domain) to examine the extent to which there was bias towards marginal electorates in grant allocation and the fourth section assesses the impact on the vote in the 2019 federal election. To illustrate our observed electoral impacts, we present the results on parliamentarians' beliefs about the impact of targeted spending on voter behaviour. The conclusion places these findings within the context of international research on pork-barrelling.

Distributive Politics

Pork-barrel politics dates back at least to ancient Rome (Millar, 1984). The practice has a long history in the United States (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002; Sidman, 2019) and more recently it has been an emerging theme in the European Union's regional spending programmes, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Medve-Balint, 2017; Papp, 2019). Despite the work of financial oversight bodies and investigative journalists to uncover pork-barrelling, better data on voting patterns has increased the ability of governments to precisely target programmes based on political considerations.

Two theories have dominated the field of distributive politics. The first is the swing voter theory, which predicts that parties will aim to influence undecided voters in swing seats in order to maximise their chances of re-election (Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987; Stokes, 2005). The second is the core voter theory, which predicts that parties will direct resources to their own supporters (Cox, 2009; Cox and McCubbins, 1986).). This reflects a desire to 'deliver' for one's party base. In the core voter theory, pork-barrelling serves not merely as a means of achieving re-election, but as an end in itself. The core voter theory also has some electoral motivations, such as to ensure electoral stability, to prevent less committed supporters from defecting to competing parties (Dixit and Londregan, 1996), and to encourage financial contributions to the election campaign (Denemark, 2020: 3). The swing voter theory suggests that pork-barrelling is electorally motivated and aimed at keeping the government in power. The core voter theory suggests that pork-barrelling governments reward their supporters with the spoils of office.

How these two theories apply in practice is determined by the institutional design of the political system in question and the consequent incentives that exist for distributive politics to be pursued. Both models assume that political influence operates by way of persuasion and by convincing voters of the merits of a particular redistribution of resources. However, mobilisation can also be important, which occurs in voluntary voting systems where differential turnout between social groups may affect the outcome of an election (Lutz and Marsh, 2007). In systems where there is compulsory voting (or very high turnout in voluntary systems), mobilisation takes place equally among all groups, so the potential bias caused by differential rates of mobilisation does not come into play (Cox, 2009: 343–344). The tightness of the race will also have an impact and if a government is confident that it will win re-election, it may be more inclined to reward supporters in safe seats rather than seek to convert voters in marginal seats.

Various studies, many using the United States as a case study, have found support for the core voter model (see, for example, Balla et al., 2002; Levitt and Snyder, 1995). The general approach is to use the local district as the basis for measurement (Denemark, 2000; Herron and Theodos, 2004). One obvious objection to this approach is that it assumes all of the groups within a district are influenced in the same way by financial incentives, regardless of their social or economic character. Other studies have attempted to overcome this criticism by identifying areas or groups within a district and analysing how each of them respond to the distributive appeals of the main parties (Dahlberg and Johansson, 2002; Stokes, 2005). In most countries, targeted spending is assumed to influence both turnout and vote choice. In Australia's compulsory voting system, only the latter matters.[8]

While there is debate about the relative merits of the core and swing voter models, there is general agreement that members are most accountable in two-party systems based on single member electorates and using a majoritarian electoral system. In this case, voters are presented with two distinct political alternatives from which to make a choice.

Voters are therefore in a position to reward or punish one candidate and party, as opposed to multiparty electorates where accountability is necessarily blurred (McGillivray, 2004). Moreover, single member electorates permit parties to target marginal seats more effectively since fewer voters are required to change an outcome when compared with a safe electorate.

A system's legislative arrangements can also shape the opportunities that exist for distributive politics. Systems that permit bargaining between legislators in order to pass bills can encourage 'side payments' (Cox and McCubbins, 1986: 46; see also Jenkins and Monroe, 2012). Such bargaining often results in the allocation of local funding in return for an elected representative's support. Other research suggests that parties tend to use different levels of government to direct resources for electoral benefit. For example, research in Britain has found that parties 'strategically allocate resources to copartisans at lower levels of government in order to advance their electoral fortune' (Fouirnaies and Mutlu-Eren, 2015: 805; Kramon and Posner, 2013; Ward and John, 1999). Similarly, evidence from Croatia has shown that electoral concerns tend to dominate grant allocation 'both within and between municipalities' (Glaurdic and Vukovic, 2017: 223). Finally, there is evidence that electoral cycles are important, so the closer the election the more likely it is that biased grant allocations will occur (Kang, 2015).

The institutional design of the Australian system presents strong incentives for parties to engage in distributive politics. At the federal level, Australia has 151 single-member electorates in the House of Representatives. The majoritarian electoral system fosters a highly disciplined two-party system, with the social democratic Labor Party competing against a coalition of the conservative Liberal and National parties (commonly referred to as 'the Coalition'). Personal votes tend to be small (Bean, 1990; McAllister, 2015), there are few independent members,[9] and most elections in the post-war era have produced a clear winner. In addition, the system of compulsory voting means that all citizens can potentially be influenced, and the 3-year election cycle provides regular opportunities for pork-barrelling. Finally, while there is independent oversight over government expenditure, there are few formal constraints on governments that decide to allocate funding based on partisan considerations. Twomey (2021) points out that even although federal sports grants may be unconstitutional, there is a low risk of a grant being struck down because only grant recipients have standing to challenge the programme in court.

In practice, then, the design of Australian political system presents few barriers to the governing party allocating public resources to maximise electoral benefits (Denemark, 2020: 3). This explains Australia's long history of distributive politics, and given the nation's love of sport, it is perhaps not surprising that sporting grants have often been subject to partisan allocation. In the next section, we provide an overview of these scandals.

Australian Sports Grants Scandals

Sporting grants can be directed by the parliamentary executive to specific electorates and typically attract local visibility. Two early scandals, in 1990 and 1993, used the allocation of 1447 grants with a total value of A$60 million to garner support in marginal electorates. The minister responsible, Ros Kelly, eventually resigned in March 1994. While the report on the programme by the Auditor-General did not directly allege pork-barrelling, the absence of documentary evidence meant that 'claims that decisions on the allocation of grants were politically motivated could not be put to rest' (Auditor-General, 1993: vii).

Pioneering research analysing the allocation of the 1990 and 1993 grants by Denemark (2000) found that there was a clear bias towards funding marginal seats held by the Labor government immediately prior to both the 1990 and 1993 elections. Grants awarded to seats held by Labor incumbents were almost twice that awarded to seats held by non-Labor incumbents (Denemark, 2000: 903). Gaunt (1999) reached similar conclusions.[10] However, neither Denemark (2000) nor Gaunt (1999) examined the impact of the programme on the election results. A further study by Leigh (2008) examined discretionary funding delivered in the 2001–2004 Australian federal electoral cycle. These programmes were intended to strengthen local social and economic infrastructure. Leigh found that the funding was skewed towards electorates held by the governing Liberal and National parties, with a particular bias towards seats held by the National Party (the junior coalition partner). Analysing the impact of four different programmes on the 2004 election, Leigh found that the strongest electoral effect was for a road repair programme.

A recent scandal involved the Community Sport Infrastructure Grant Program which was established in 2018 with the purported aim of ensuring that 'more Australians have access to quality sporting facilities, encouraging greater community participation in sport and physical activity' (Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), 2020: 16). Administered by Sport Australia, a statutory authority, grant applications were invited from sporting and not-for-profit organisations, local governments and remote education institutions for a maximum of A$500,000 per application. Between August and September 2018 some 2056 applications[11] were received seeking a total of A$396 million in funding. A grand total of A$103 million was made available for allocation (ANAO, 2020: Table 1.1). Further details on the sports grant scheme are described in Appendix.

All of the applications were evaluated against three published criteria: community participation in sport; community need for the project; and project design and delivery (ANAO, 2020: 32–35).[12] We know of no evidence that sporting participation maps onto Australian electoral boundaries, so these criteria should not have led to a political bias in the allocation of sporting grants. Sport Australia used the merit criteria to assign each grant a score between 0 and 100. Had there been no political interference in the allocation of grants, then the budgeted funding would have seen applications funded if they received an evaluation from Sport Australia of 74 or higher.

At the same time as Sport Australia considered the applications, a parallel evaluation was being conducted by the minister's office. According to the ANAO (2020: 38) this evaluation identified 'marginal electorates held by the Coalition as well as those electorates not held by the Coalition that were to be targeted in the 2019 election'. In addition to applications from electorates that were of interest in the upcoming election, notice was also taken of 'representations received from senators and members' (ANAO, 2020: 39). As the ANAO report comments:

> the applications that the minister's office was proposing be successful were not those assessed as having demonstrated the greatest merit in terms of the published program guidelines. This was particularly the case for projects located in a marginal or targeted electorate. (ANAO, 2020: 39)

The net effect of this further evaluation of the applications was that 417 grants were awarded which fell below Sport Australia's cut-off score (ANAO, 2020: 57).[13]

Applying Sport Australia's merit-based cut-off (74 out of 100) to the successful and unsuccessful applications produces the four groups shown in Table 1. Just over half of the

Table 1. Successful and Unsuccessful Grant Applications.

	Grants N	Grants percent	Sport Australia score (0–10)	Mean amount (tens of thousands of dollars)
Awarded				
Above cut-off (74–100)	272	14	80.7	16.8
Below cut-off (<74)	412	21	64.5	13.6
Not awarded				
Above cut-off (74–100)	191	10	79.9	30.5
Below cut-off (<74)	1071	55	53.5	21.0
(Totals)	(1946)	(100)	(62.2)	(19.8)

Source: See Appendix.

applications fell below the cut-off score and were not awarded. However, 21% of the total also fell below this cut-off but were successful.[14] Almost half of this group were awarded in the third round of the process. It is this group of 412 applications that we consider were funded for political reasons rather than on merit. Around 1 in 10 of the applications were not successful but based on their Sport Australia scores should have been funded if the merit criteria had been properly applied.

In contrast to past research by Denemark (2000), Gaunt (1999) and Leigh (2008), the availability of much more detailed data for the 2018–2019 sports grants, including unsuccessful as well as successful grants and the precise score allocated to each by the government department, provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the allocation of these grants as well as their electoral effects. We outline the results of these analyses in the next two sections.

Grant Allocation and Political Bias

The first question to address is whether some of the grants were awarded on political criteria rather than on merit. To examine the extent of political influence on the award of a grant, we test two hypotheses, corresponding to the two major theories outlined earlier:

> Hypothesis 1. Equally meritorious applications for grants in marginal electorates were more likely to be successful than grants in non-marginal electorates (swing voter theory).
>
> Hypothesis 2. Equally meritorious applications for grants from electorates with a government incumbent member were more likely to be successful than applications from electorates with a non-government incumbent member (core voter theory).

As a preliminary analysis, we plot the marginality of seats against the total amount of sports grant funding they received. The first graph in Figure 1 shows on the horizontal axis the Coalition's two-party preferred vote in the 2016 election (i.e. the election prior to the allocation of sporting grants), and on the vertical axis the total number of sports grants provided through the programme in question. The second graph in Figure 1 repeats the exercise, but with the amount of funding on the vertical axis.

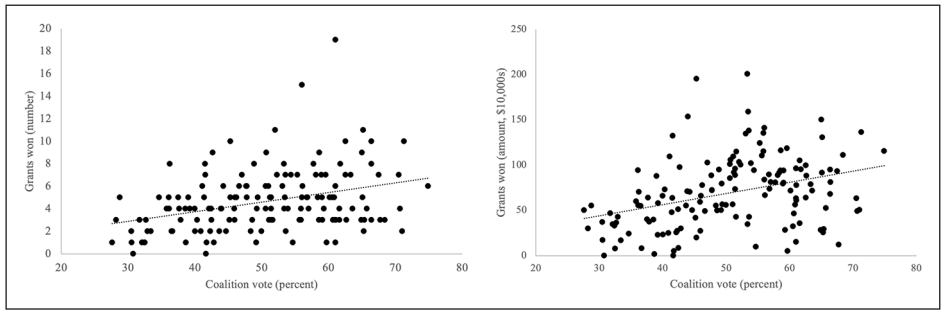

Figure 1. Sport Grants and the 2016 Coalition Vote.
Source: See Appendix.
Vote is the Coalition's share of the two-party preferred vote in the 2016 election. Each dot represents an electorate. The line is the regression slope.

In both graphs, we observe a tendency for both the number of grants won and the total amount of funding to be higher in electorates that received a larger Coalition vote in 2016. This is clearly demonstrated by the trendlines. There is also a tendency for the grants to be concentrated around the electorates that are most marginal, that is, with a Coalition two-party preferred vote of between 45% and 55%. Both graphs show some notable outliers. The largest number of grants awarded in any electorate – 19 – was in the safe Liberal Western Australian seat of Durack, which is one of the largest parliamentary constituencies in the world, covering an area approximately the size of Mongolia. This is followed by the marginal Liberal seat of McMillan, which won 15 grants. The largest amount awarded to any electorate – just over $2 million – was to the safe Liberal–National seat of Dawson.

In order to test our two hypotheses more formally, we estimate ordinary least squares regression models using as the units of analysis the 146 electorates for which data are available (see Appendix). The dependent variables are the total number of grants applied for and awarded in each electorate, and the total amount applied for and awarded in each electorate. Since we know the score that the department assigned to each grant, we can further distinguish between grants that were awarded below the threshold (i.e. based on political influence) and those that were awarded above the threshold (i.e. on merit).

The main independent variables are divided into two groups, the marginality of the electorate (measured at the election prior to the allocation of sporting grants) and the party of the incumbent House of Representatives member.[15] Marginality is measured by a modified version of the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) three-category criteria. The AEC identifies marginal electorates (less than 6% margin in the two party preferred vote); fairly safe electorates (6%–10%); and safe electorates (more than 10%).[16] Since a large majority of electorates fall into the safe category, we further distinguish between safe (10%–25%) and very safe (more than 25%) electorates. Applications from very safe electorates form the excluded category. Incumbency is measured by whether the sitting House of Representatives member was Labor, Liberal, National, Liberal–National (in Queensland only) or independent. Labor members are the excluded category.[17]

In addition, the models control for the socioeconomic status of the electorate. Since the responsibility for applying for a sports grant rests with the particular organisation, it is possible that clubs in more affluent areas will be more skilled at completing these

applications than those in less affluent areas. At the same time, more affluent electors will be more likely to vote for the centre–right Coalition parties and less affluent ones for Labor. Any observed effect may therefore be a result of the relative affluence of the electorate as opposed to political factors. In order to take this into account, the models control for the socioeconomic status of the electorate, using census measures based on occupation, household income, education, mortgage and rental payments, and household composition. The composition of the combined scale is described in detail in Appendix and is scored from 0 (low affluence) to 10 (high affluence).

The top panel of Table 2 shows the relationship between grants and the marginality of the electorate, providing a test of the swing voter hypothesis. In the second column the coefficient of 0.67 suggests that a marginal electorate could expect to receive around two-thirds of a sporting grant more than a very safe electorate, controlling for incumbency and the socioeconomic status of the electorate. A marginal electorate could also expect to receive around A$244,900 (coefficient of 24.49) more in sports grants funding than a very safe electorate, again controlling for incumbency and electorate socioeconomic status. Fairly safe electorates received A$323,600 (coefficient of 32.36) more funding than very safe electorates. In terms of grants that were awarded below the threshold, there is no effect for marginal electorates either in the number of grants won or the dollar amount. There is, then, solid evidence to confirm the swing voter hypothesis.

The bottom panel of Table 2 shows the relationship between grants and incumbency, testing the core voter hypothesis. Electorates with Liberal and National lower house members (though not Liberal–National members in Queensland) were significantly more likely to apply for grants, for those grants to be successful, and for the grants to deliver larger amounts compared with Labor members. The effects are especially notable for National Party incumbents. Electorates with National members could expect to win just over two additional grants (coefficient of 2.43) compared with electorates with Labor members, just under two of which (coefficient of 1.79) were awarded below the Sport Australia threshold for funding. These results mirror those of Leigh (2008), who found from his analysis of the allocation of federal government grants in the early 2000s that the National Party did substantially better than their Liberal partners. In the current case, the relevant minister, Bridget McKenzie, was from the National Party.

In terms of the amounts involved, electorates with National incumbents could expect to receive just under A$500,000 (coefficient of 46.79) more funding than electorates with Labor members. Around half of the difference was due to grants that were awarded below the threshold. In general, we observe similar patterns for grants awarded above the threshold (on merit) and below the threshold (on political considerations). This may reflect the fact that the government not only steered more grants in its preferred direction, but also encouraged more grant applications from those same electorates. These results, taking into account the socioeconomic characteristics of the electorates, verify the core voter hypothesis. In the next section we test the proposition that sports grants influenced the outcome of the 2019 federal election.

Grant Allocation and Election Outcomes

Does pork-barrelling of sports grants deliver votes? There are two main ways in which the award of a grant might affect the vote. The first is through the total number of grants awarded in an electorate, since more grants may allow politicians to target a greater number and diversity of interest groups. This would be most plausible in the event that news

Table 2. Political Influences on the Number and Amount of Grants.

	Total number of grants				Total amount (tens of thousands of dollars)			
	Applied	Awarded	Awarded below threshold	Awarded above threshold	Applied	Awarded	Awarded below threshold	Awarded above threshold
Marginality (excluded category: very safe)								
Safe	−0.71	0.43	−0.09	0.52	−25.34	9.40	2.04	7.35
	(2.00)	(0.53)	(0.37)	(0.35)	(37.44)	(7.23)	(6.09)	(5.87)
Fairly safe	4.07	1.11	0.57	0.54	112.31**	32.36**	18.80**	13.56
	(2.89)	(0.76)	(0.53)	(0.50)	(54.15)	(10.46)	(8.81)	(8.49)
Marginal	0.23	0.67	0.25	0.42	10.62	24.49**	10.21	14.28*
	(2.45)	(.65)	(.46)	(.43)	(46.26)	(8.93)	(7.53)	(7.25)
Incumbency (excluded category: Labor)								
Liberal	10.27**	2.42**	1.07**	1.35**	158.63**	31.26**	8.15	23.11**
	(1.96)	(0.52)	(0.36)	(.34)	(36.77)	(7.10)	(5.99)	(5.76)
National	9.74**	2.43**	1.79**	0.65	153.52**	46.79**	26.83**	19.96*
	(3.48)	(0.92)	(0.64)	(0.60)	(65.27)	(12.61)	(10.62)	(10.23)
Liberal	3.57	0.44	0.47	−0.03	80.44*	19.92**	15.32**	4.63
National	(2.41)	(0.64)	(0.45)	(0.42)	(45.24)	(8.74)	(7.36)	(7.09)
Independent	13.95**	1.69	0.24	1.45*	186.88**	8.83	−0.38	9.20
	(4.17)	(1.10)	(0.77)	(0.72)	(78.12)	(15.09)	(12.71)	(12.24)
Electorate SES	−2.02**	−0.44**	−0.22**	−0.22**	−34.35**	−3.76**	−0.32	−3.44**
	(0.42)	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(7.85)	(1.52)	(1.28)	(1.23)
Constant	15.61	4.81	3.00	1.80	305.77	55.62	28.11	27.52
Adj R^2	0.25	0.19	0.11	0.11	0.25	0.22	0.05	0.13

Source: See Appendix.
SES: socioeconomic status.
Estimates are from ordinary least squares regressions showing coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) predicting the total number of grants and the total grant amount. N = 146 electorates. Marginality and incumbency related to the election prior to the allocation of the grants. See text for details of variables and scoring.
*p < 0.10, **p < 0.05.

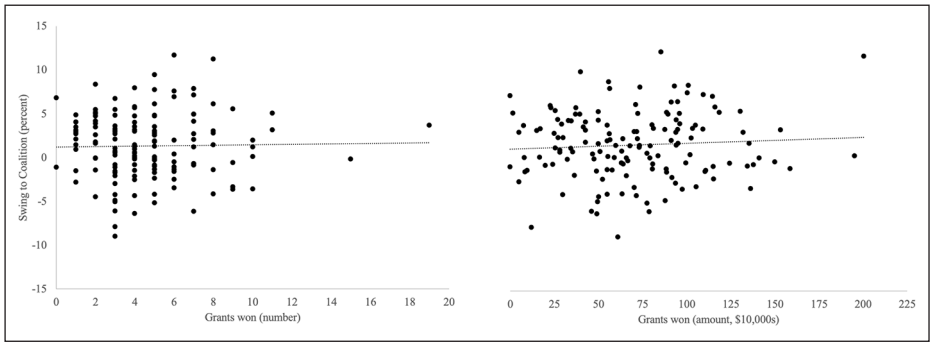

Figure 2. Sports Grants and the 2016–2019 Vote Swing.
Source: See Appendix.
Vote swing is estimated as the difference in the Coalition's share of the two-party preferred vote between the 2016 and 2019 elections. Each dot represents an electorate. The line is the regression slope.

coverage is not proportional to the size of the grant. In that case, the electoral impact of two grants for $10,000 each may be larger than the electoral impact of a single $20,000 grant. We call this 'media release theory'. The second way in which a grant could influence the vote is in the total amount awarded to an electorate. In theory, a larger amount may produce more visible improvements to sporting facilities and generate more interest when compared with a smaller amount. We call this possibility 'cheque size theory'.[18] This leads to two hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 3. The greater the total number of grants awarded in an electorate, the higher the swing towards the Coalition in the election (media release theory).
>
> Hypothesis 4. The greater the total grant amount awarded in an electorate, the higher the swing towards the Coalition in the election (cheque size theory).

In Figure 2, we again plot the total number of grants awarded (in the first panel) and the total amount involved (in the second panel), this time against the electoral swing. Even without including controls for party incumbency, these charts show little evidence of a relationship between grant allocations and the government's subsequent performance at the ballot box. The two trendlines are virtually flat, showing no relationship between the grants awarded and the swing in the election.

In order to confirm the absence of any relationship between grants and electoral outcomes, and to rigorously test the media release and cheque size theories, we estimate a series of regression models. We aggregate the number and dollar amount of the grants awarded to each electorate and use these variables to predict the swing to the Coalition in the two-party preferred vote between the 2016 and 2019 elections. Since we know which of the grants were awarded on merit and which on political influence, we can further distinguish between them in the models. All of the models also take into account incumbency. As the dependent variable is a percentage, the model is estimated using ordinary least squares.

The results in Table 3 show that the award of additional sports grant funding had no statistically significant effect on the vote swing to the Coalition in the 2019 election, after a wide range of other factors are taken into account. In terms of overall dollars, the specifications in Models 2 and 3 show a zero coefficient on funding and is precisely

Table 3. Electoral Impact of the Number and Amount of Grants

	Two-party preferred vote swing to Coalition 2016–2019					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Number of grants awarded						
Total	−0.13	–	−0.16	–	–	–
	(0.10)		(0.11)			
Political influence	–	–	–	−0.12	–	−0.09
				(0.14)		(0.19)
Merit	–	–	–	−0.16	–	−0.24
				(0.15)		(0.20)
Total amount awarded (tens of thousands of dollars)						
Total	–	0.00	0.00	–	–	–
		(.01)	(.01)			
Political influence	–	–	–	–	0.00	0.00
					(0.01)	(0.01)
Merit	–	–	–	–	0.00	0.01
					(0.01)	(0.01)
Incumbency (excluded: Labor)						
Liberal	−0.26	−0.51	−0.31	−0.25	−0.53	−0.35
	(0.63)	(0.62)	(0.64)	(0.63)	(0.63)	(0.65)
National	−2.30**	−2.48**	−2.37**	−2.32**	−2.48**	−2.45**
	(1.02)	(1.04)	(1.04)	(1.04)	(1.05)	(1.06)
Liberal–National	2.56**	2.55**	2.50**	2.55**	2.56**	2.50**
	(0.72)	(0.74)	(0.74)	(0.72)	(0.74)	(0.74)
Independent	0.17	−0.02	0.19	0.20	−0.03	−0.24
	(1.24)	(1.24)	(1.24)	(1.25)	(1.24)	(1.26)
Electorate SES	−1.07**	−1.02**	−1.07	−1.08**	−1.02**	−1.06**
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Constant	5.65	5.12	5.55	5.64	5.11	5.46
Adj R^2	0.41	0.40	0.41	0.41	0.40	0.40

Source: See Appendix.

SES: socioeconomic status. Estimates are from an ordinary least squares regressions showing coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) predicting the percent two-party preferred vote swing in the Coalition in the 2019 election. N = 146 electorates. The number of grants awarded is the total N for each electorate, and those awarded above the Sport Australia threshold ('merit') and those awarded below the threshold ('political influence'). The amount of the awards for each electorate is in tens of thousands of Australian dollars. Incumbency is a dummy variable for which party held the seat prior to the 2019 election.

**$p < 0.05$.

estimated. In terms of the number of grants awarded, none of the variables come close to statistical significance, even at the 10% level. In contrast to the measures of the sport grants, there are strong effects for incumbency and for the socioeconomic status of the electorate, as we would expect. All of the models explain between 40% and 41% of the overall variance, suggesting a good model fit. We therefore reject both the media release and the cheque size hypotheses.

While much effort was devoted to directing grants towards the seats of Coalition members and seats that the Coalition wished to win in the election, this appears to have had no impact on the vote. The only other effects of significance in Table 3 are those related to socioeconomic status and incumbency. The overall swing to the Coalition government in

the election (combining Liberal, National Queensland Liberal–National and the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party) was 1.17%. Higher socioeconomic status electorates saw a smaller swing towards the government, with each point on the 10-point socioeconomic scale being associated with a 1 percentage point smaller swing to the Coalition. Holding constant socioeconomic status, the electoral swing to the government was around 2 percentage points larger in seats held by Queensland Liberal–National members, and around 2 percentage points smaller in swings held by the National Party members in other states. The coefficients on the numbers of grants awarded and the value of grants awarded are mostly close to zero, and all are statistically insignificant.

What accounts for the absence of an electoral effect? One possible explanation is the circumstances of the 2019 election. The election campaign was dominated by major debates over economic policy, housing affordability and climate change, and saw an unprecedented barrage of election advertising (Gauja et al., 2020; Sawer and Maley, 2020).[19] In particular, the election was held in the wake of the governing party changing its leader twice in less than 4 years (Cameron and McAllister, 2020). It may be the case, then, that the 2019 election was different from previous elections by reducing the potential advantage that pork-barrelling could deliver to the incumbent party. Put simply, the range of issues in the election campaign and their national importance may have drowned out local issues.

Another possible explanation is that our results are not in fact all that different from prior studies. Analysing four government programmes, Leigh (2008) finds strong and consistent evidence of electoral effects for only one: the Roads to Recovery Program. Even in this case, the impact of the funding on the election outcome was relatively small, with A$1 million of funding producing only a 0.25 percentage point increase in vote share in the 2004 election. It is plausible that other studies of targeted spending and electoral outcomes that found no significant effect have been consigned to the file drawer.

If targeted spending does not produce large electoral gains, then why does it persist? One possibility is that politicians see pork-barrelling as being more electorally beneficial than do social scientists. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a straw poll of members of the Australian House of Representatives (see Appendix for survey details). We asked members:

> Please answer this hypothetical question. Suppose that the government announces before an election a local funding commitment of $500,000 in an electorate. What is your best estimate as to the impact of this announcement on the percentage share of the two-party vote that the government receives in that electorate in the following election?

Members of parliament could enter any numerical figure in response. The results of our straw poll are plotted in Figure 3. The mean response was 0.81%, and the median was 0.75%. Only 14% of respondents gave an answer of zero, and none gave a negative response (i.e. an answer implying that pork-barrelling typically provokes an electoral backlash). Half the respondents gave an answer of 1 percentage point or above.

Note that an electoral effect of 1 percentage point or above effectively lies beyond the 95% confidence interval for our estimated effect of A$500,000 of sport grant expenditure (an additional swing of −1.5 to 1 percentage points).[20] Note too that such an electoral effect is well outside the 95% confidence interval that Leigh (2008) estimates for A$500,000 of additional road expenditure (an additional swing of 0.07–0.10 percentage points).[21] Similarly, the findings of Levitt and Snyder (1997) on US pork-barrelling imply

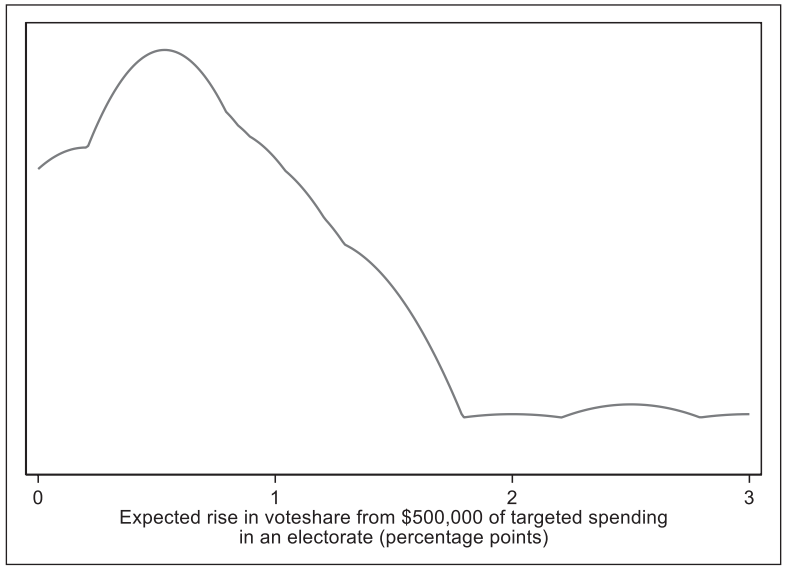

Figure 3. Straw Poll of Australian Politicians' Views on Targeted Spending (Kernel Density Plot).
Source: See Appendix.

that A$500,000 of funding would produce only a 0.03 percentage point swing (with a 95% confidence interval of 0.003–0.066).[22]

Another way to think about the electoral effect is to imagine a government that devoted A$3 million of pork to each electorate. If each A$500,000 of spending did indeed increase the incumbent party's vote share by 1 percentage point (and assuming that the effects are linear), then such spending would raise the incumbent party's vote by 6 percentage points nationwide, virtually guaranteeing re-election for a total expenditure of less than A$500 million, or about 0.1% of the national budget. Such a result strains credulity.

While the results of our straw poll are not necessarily representative of the parliament, they suggest that parliamentarians are substantially more optimistic than social scientists about the vote-winning power of targeted spending.

Conclusion

Modern systems of government are based on meritocratic public appointments, while government expenditure is governed by law and subject to independent oversight. Despite this, the fusing of party power with the government executive in parliamentary systems creates incentives for the governing party to exercise its control over expenditure to win votes (Denemark, 2020). Using a unique dataset from the 2018–2019 sports grants scandal in Australia, we have been able to test this assumption. Confirming the findings of previous Australian studies (Denemark, 2000, 2014; Gaunt, 1999; Leigh, 2008), we find that grants were more likely to be delivered in marginal electorates and in those held by the ruling party. It suggests that the government was seeking to persuade swing voters to re-elect the incumbent, while at the same time rewarding their core voters by providing them with a disproportionate share of the spoils of office.

Turning to the effect of grants on the subsequent election, we find no consistent evidence that electorates which received more sports grant funding tended to swing towards the government. This result also holds when we consider the number of grants (rather than the dollar amount). This finding would appear to contradict the conventional political wisdom, given the risks that some government ministers will take to direct funds for political ends. To explore this, we conducted a straw poll, which indicated that Australian members of parliament believe that the electoral impact of pork-barrelling is larger than the social science research suggests.

Our finding that the electoral rewards from pork-barrelling are either non-existent or marginal at best mirrors other research which finds that 'most members of the general public remain indifferent to alterations in the flow of new awards' (Stein and Bickers, 1994: 394). It would appear, then, the problem rests with parliamentarians, not voters, who consistently inflate the effect that electorally-targeted local expenditure may have on their vote. So long as parliamentarians adhere to this view, it is likely to persist – regardless of the findings of social scientists.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: A.L. is a member of parliament representing the opposition Labor Party. However, the topic of pork-barrelling is one that he began publishing on prior to entering parliament, when he was an academic at the Australian National University.

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Notes

1. Pork-barrelling in parliamentary systems differs from other forms of distributive politics, such as clientelism, in that it is a vertical form of distributive politics, with only the parliamentary executive having the authority to allocate resources (Denemark, 2020).
2. For reviews, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994); (Berry, Burden, and Howell, 2010), Cox (2009) and Sidman (2019).
3. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2019. Downer had also apparently earlier informed the minister's office that she was 'particularly keen to support' three applications in the electorate, two of which were approved (ANAO, 2020: footnote 5).
4. 'Electorate' is the Australian term for a parliamentary constituency.
5. McKenzie's resignation was not due to the overall mismanagement of the scheme itself, but to the fact that she failed to disclose a conflict of interest, which saw one of the sporting grants being awarded to a gun club of which she was a member. The grant to the Wangaratta Clay Target Club received a Sport Australia rating of 69, suggesting that in the absence of political interference it would not have been funded (since it fell below the cut-off of 74).

6. The 2004 Regional Partnerships Program did provide data on approved and rejected grants, as well as grants approved before and after the 2004 election. The 1993 Sports Grants Program also had some additional data which differentiated grants by eligibility level. See Denemark (2000, 2014).
7. For example, a study analysing partisanship and road funding might estimate the 'fair' allocation across electorates by using variables such as land area, and then assume that the unexplained residual reflected pork-barrelling. However, if variables are omitted that are correlated with both merit and party affiliation, it will lead to a mis-estimation of the true extent of pork-barrelling.
8. This is a slight tendency for those who would not vote if voting was voluntary to be more influenced by their local candidate than those who would definitely vote if it was voluntary. Using the 2019 Australian Election Study, 13% of those who would definitely not vote if it were voluntary said they were influenced by 'the candidates in your electorate' compared with 7% of those who would definitely vote if it were voluntary. To the extent that the influence of candidates correlates with a responsiveness to pork-barrelling, this suggests that compulsory voting increases the electoral impact of pork-barrelling.
9. Although the proportion of independents has been increasing in recent elections, see Munro (2019).
10. 'With the possible exception of the unemployed, disadvantaged groups did not receive priority funding under the program. Instead, priority funding appears to have been provided to very marginal and marginal government-held seats' (Gaunt, 1999: 73).
11. A further five new applications were received and accepted after the closing date and four of the original applications were allowed to amend their applications (ANAO, 2020: 7).
12. The criteria were weighted, with community participation accounting for 50% of the score, and the remaining two criteria 25% each.
13. The ANAO (2020: 30) report also notes that in March 2019 the minister's office asked for an assessment of four projects which had been amended together with five new applications, 'four of which came from proponents that had not submitted an application when the program was open for applications in August and September 2018' (ANAO, 2020: 29). Of these nine applications, one had already been recommended for funding; the remaining eight had scores that precluded them from approval but were nevertheless approved by the minister's office.
14. This estimate is five less than the figure of 417 reported by the ANAO, and may be accounted for by where the exact cut-off of 74 was applied.
15. Preliminary models also controlled for state and territory effects, on the grounds that some areas may have more leverage over grant allocation than others. These models produced similar results to those presented here and in the interests of parsimony, state/territory was excluded from the final model.
16. Early models also used marginality as a continuous measure, but the three dummy variables used here proved to be a better model fit.
17. Preliminary modelling combined the various conservative categories. The categories used here proved to be the best model fit. There were five independents: Andrew Wilkie (representing the division of Denison, which was renamed Clark at the 2019 election), Helen Haines (Indi), Bob Katter (Kennedy), Rebekha Sharkie (Mayo), and Zali Steggall (Warringah). In addition, Adam Bandt, the Greens leader representing the seat of Melbourne, is also included in this category.
18. By 'cheque size' we mean the amount, not the physical size of the cheque. However, given that the sports grants affair became a scandal following the use of a novelty cheque, we cannot rule out that the physical size of the cheque might have an electoral impact. We leave this intriguing question to future researchers.
19. According to Simms (2020), the top issues in the election included leadership, the economy, taxation, housing, terrorism, emissions targets, migration levels, urban infrastructure and religious freedom. The 2019 Australian Election Study also shows that two-thirds of the respondents said they were influenced by policy issues in making their voting decision, the highest figure since 2001 (Cameron and McAllister, 2019: 24).
20. Our estimate of the 95% confidence interval of A$10,000 of additional sport grant funding is −0.03 to 0.02 percentage points. Accordingly, the 95% confidence interval on A$500,000 of additional funding is a swing of −1.5 to 1 percentage points.
21. Leigh (2008, Table 5, column 1) estimates that A$1 million of additional road expenditure in 2004 dollars produces a swing of 0.248 percentage points, with a standard error of 0.040. A$1 million in 2004 dollars is equivalent to A$1.4 million in 2021 dollars. This implies a point estimate on A$500,000 of 2021 spending of $0.248 \times (0.5/1.4) = 0.09$, and a 95% confidence interval of 0.07–0.10.
22. Levitt and Snyder (1997) estimate that US$100 per capita of targeted funding produces a swing of 2 percentage points (with a standard error of 0.9 percentage points). This figure is in 1990 US dollars, and equates to A$260 in 2021 Australian dollars. With around 110,000 voters in each Australian electorate, this

suggests that A$28.6 million in targeted funding produces a 2 percentage point swing, and therefore that A$500,000 in targeted funding produces an electoral swing of $2 \times (0.5 / 28.6) = 0.03$ percentage points. The 95% confidence interval on this estimate ranges from 0.003 to 0.066 percentage points.

23. The published data does not permit us to identify the round that each of the unsuccessful applications was considered in.
24. This grant was awarded to the Ballarat South Senior Citizens Centre for improvements to their indoor bowls facility.

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Author Biographies

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Appendix

Sports Grants

The sports grants data are based on two main sources. The first is a spreadsheet of the sports grant applications by electorate. The spreadsheet was leaked to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and included the name of the body applying for the grant, the purpose to which it would be put, the amount asked for, the Sport Australia score (from 0 to 100) and the electorate name. The spreadsheet was read into the House of Representatives Hansard by the first-named author on 28 October 2020. Of the 241 pages for that day's proceedings, 66 pages were taken up with the details from the spreadsheet. Since the spreadsheet did not contain which grants were awarded and which were not, this was

Table A1. Grant Applications by Outcome and Round.

	Number	Mean Sport Australia score	Mean amount (tens of thousands of dollars)
Grants awarded			
Round 1	230	75.2	13.4
Round 2	233	70.5	13.6
Round 3	221	66.9	17.8
(Total awarded)	(684)	(70.9)	(14.9)
Grants not awarded	1262	57.5	22.4
All grants	1946	62.2	197.6

Source: See Appendix 1.

derived from the second source, the formal list of successful grants from Sport Australia; this is available at https://www.sportaus.gov.au/grants_and_funding/community_sport_infrastructure_grant_program/successful_grant_recipient_list.

There were a small number of errors in the tabled data, mainly in respect of the electorate, and these were corrected. There are also small differences between the dataset used here and the one that was supplied to the ANAO. The ANAO report (2020: 7) cited a total of 2056 applications having been received; the dataset used here has 1946. We know that an unknown number of applications were rejected as being incomplete (ANAO, 2020: 49), while some others were removed and yet others added. There are, therefore, slight discrepancies between the ANAO data and the data used here, although not of sufficient magnitude to change our overall conclusions.

Three calls for applications were made by Sport Australia, in December 2018, February 2019 and April 2019. There were zero applications in only three electorates – Macarthur and Sydney, both very safe Labor seats, and Mitchell, a very safe Liberal seat. In the case of four electorates – Bennelong, Werriwa, Watson and Longman – there was only a single application. At the other end of the scale, 60 applications came from Durack, a very safe Liberal seat in Western Australia, followed by 58 in Grey in South Australia, also a very safe Liberal seat. Of particular note was the 46 applications from the marginal electorate of Mayo, a formerly safe Liberal seat that had been narrowly won by an independent candidate in the prior (2016) election.

The first column in Appendix Table A1 shows the number of grants awarded in each of the three rounds (the available data show what grants were awarded in each of the three rounds, but not which grants were not awarded). The second column in Appendix Table A1 shows the mean Sport Australia score across the various rounds. In round 1 the mean score for the successful grants was 75.2, but this declined to 70.5 in round 2 and to 66.9 for grants awarded in round 3. The mean score for the 1262 unsuccessful applications was 57.5.[23]

By the end of the process 684 grants had been awarded, representing a success rate of around one in three. Appendix Table A1 shows that approximately equal numbers of grants were awarded in each of the three rounds. A total of 51 of the successful applications received the maximum amount possible, A$500,000; the lowest amount awarded to a single application was A$1850.[24] Appendix Table A1 also shows that the amount awarded in each of the three rounds gradually increased, from a mean of A$134,131 in round 1 to A$177,776 in round 3. The mean amount applied for among the unsuccessful

grants was much higher than the successful ones, at A$224,095; this compares with A$148,695 for the grants that were awarded.

In the analyses of electorates in Tables 2 and 3, there were a series of boundary changes between the 2016 and 2019 elections. One electorate, Port Adelaide, was abolished and is therefore excluded from the analyses. In addition, six other electorates were abolished and replaced by new electorates. The analyses were re-run excluding these six electorates with boundary changes and the results were almost identical. We therefore report the results for 146 electorates (which excludes Port Adelaide, and the three electorates, Macarthur, Mitchell and Sydney, which did not apply for any grants).

Electorate Socioeconomic Status

In order to control for the socioeconomic status of each electorate, a factor analysis was conducted using a wide range of census characteristics which are available by federal electorate. The results of this analysis are available in McAllister and Snagovsky (2018: Table A1). Seven variables are used, defined as follows. Higher proportions of professional workers (managers; chief executives, general managers and legislators; specialist managers; hospitality, retail and service managers; arts and media professionals; business, human resource and marketing professionals; legal, social and welfare professionals; personal assistants and secretaries; sales representatives and agents); higher proportions with high household income (between A$182,000 and A$416,000, minus household income between A$20,800 and A$65,000); higher proportions of workers employed in professional industries (information media and communications; financial and insurance services; rental, hiring and real estate services; professional, scientific and technical services); higher proportions with higher education (postgraduate degree; graduate diploma and graduate certificate; bachelor degree); low proportions with low mortgage payments (between A$150 and A$1399 per month); low proportions of one parent families (one parent family with none, one, two or three dependent children); and low proportions with low rental payments (weekly rent between A$100 and A$249).

Survey of MPs

Many surveys of elected officials reflect the views of staff members, who open the letter or email containing the poll, and fill it out on behalf of the politician. To avoid this problem, we sent our poll directly by text message to a small subset of MPs, asking them to fill out a one-question survey that would take less than a minute. To maintain the confidentiality of responses, the survey was conducted through the SurveyMonkey website. We describe the results as a straw poll because we did not approach all MPs and have only 14 respondents. However, our respondents are drawn from all political parties, from multiple states, and from frontbench and backbench representatives, comprising around one-tenth of all Australian members of parliament.