

Sabbatical Report –Fall Fall 2010
Scott A. Frisch, Professor of Political Science
Earmarks: Who Gets What, How, and Why

Summary of Sabbatical Semester:

I used the time provided by the sabbatical leave to work on the book *Earmarks: Who Gets What, How and Why* (to be co-authored with Sean Q Kelly). The book is under contract with the University of Michigan Press with a completed manuscript due to the publisher in late fall 2011. This book will represent the culmination of a data collection and analysis effort that has already lasted more than seven years and will undoubtedly be the most important scholarly contribution of my career. Without the time afforded to me by the sabbatical, completion of this book would have been impossible. More specifically, the semester was devoted to data collection, entry and analysis and writing preliminary drafts of chapters for the book, as well as extensive reading and assessment of the literature on congressional distributive spending and the evolution of the federal government budget process.

Project Overview:

Congressional earmarks have come to symbolize all that is wrong with our system of government. The popular depiction, fed by media exposes of projects such as the infamous “Bridge to Nowhere,” is of a Congress obsessed with wasteful local projects fueled by the demands of greedy lobbyists and then delivered by Congress in exchange for campaign contributions or even worse, outright bribes. Scandals concerning congressional earmarks such as those involving Duke Cunningham, Jack Abramoff and Ted Stevens have reinforced this image. This depiction has recently been conveyed to a much larger audience of the American public through the efforts of John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign. Opposition to wasteful earmarks was a centerpiece of the McCain campaign, and was emphasized by the Senator in campaign speeches, debates and advertising.

Until very recently, few political scientists have been interested in getting beyond the hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding congressionally directed spending to systematically analyze earmarks based on prevailing theories of congressional behavior. Those previous scholarly studies that have empirically analyzed earmarked spending (including my own work) have used publicly available data that indicate actual earmarks or actual district expenditures.¹ The foundation of this book is a unique dataset: the earmark *requests* of members of Congress. These data were painstakingly

¹ See Frisch, Scott A. 1998. *The Politics of Pork: An Empirical Study of Congressional Appropriations Earmarks*. New York: Garland Publishing (now Routledge).

collected by me and my coauthor from the archived papers of former Appropriations Subcommittee Chairs and ranking members who received earmark requests from other members of Congress.² In addition, data on Senate earmarks were obtained from the records of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on the Department of the Interior and related Agencies, which are housed in the National Archives. These data are unique; no other scholars have gained access to actual earmark requests. Our data provide unprecedented insight into the process through which members of Congress generate district-specific earmarks—often referred to as “pork barrel” projects—because we are able to compare those who *get* earmarks with those who *do not*.

Harold Lasswell first proposed a series of interrelated questions that underpin much of modern political science in his classic work: *Politics: Who gets What, How and Why?*³ This research project seeks to provide an answer to Lasswell’s questions in the context of the contemporary U.S. Congress. This book will improve our understanding of the legislative process in general and our understanding of decision making regarding public spending in particular. It will challenge the accepted paradigm of congressional behavior (distributive theory) and provide insight into a widely vilified practice (earmarking) which has not been subject to serious quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Specifically, this work focuses on earmark requests submitted to four congressional Appropriations Subcommittees: Energy and Water, Interior and Related Agencies, Labor Health and Human Services, and Military Construction. These subcommittees typically produce bills and accompanying committee reports which contain large numbers of earmarks and are often pointed to as exemplars of the pork barrel. As such, they provide a laboratory for testing the dominant theory of congressional organization and congressional behavior: Distributive theory. Distributive theory claims that members of Congress seek assignment to authorizing and spending committees which will enable them to oversupply their district with desirable benefits, which in turn will guarantee reelection. Focusing our analysis on subcommittees that exercise extensive congressional control over spending is a conscious choice aimed at offering an important test of the applicability of distributive theory for explaining congressional organization and congressional behavior. In these subcommittee bills there *should* be evidence that supports distributive theory. If our findings fail to support distributive theory in these subcommittees it is unlikely that support will be found in the behavior of other subcommittees.

My scholarship combines the archival methods of history with the quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis common in political science and other social sciences. This book will use mixed methods to contribute to the scholarship on public spending and congressional

² Data have been obtained from the archived papers of the following former members of Congress: Tom Beville (D-AL), Silvio Conte (R-MA), Richard Gephardt (D-MO), Ernest “Fritz” Hollings (D-SC), Bob Livingston (R-LA), James McClure (R-ID), John Myers (R-IN), Ron Packard (R-CA), John Porter (R-IL), Ralph Regula (R-OH), Barbara Vucanovich (R-NV). Data collection has been supported by past faculty development mini-grants and external funding. Data are coded from internal spreadsheets listing earmark requests and request letters from individual legislators.

³ Lasswell, Harold D. 1935. *Who Gets What, When and How?* New York: Whittlesey House Publishers.

organization. In addition, the qualitative description and analysis of earmarked spending has the potential to shed light on a poorly understood practice, which in turn could help to reduce cynicism towards Congress and the constitutional power of the purse.

Summary of Work/Outcomes:

Data collection for this manuscript now has been completed. Following submission of the sabbatical proposal, Dr. Kelly and I located additional data on Senate earmarks for the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee in the records of the Center for Legislative Archives at National Archives. These data from fiscal year 1981 through fiscal year 1989 directly parallel data on House earmarks that we located in the papers of Representative Ralph Regula, and will allow us to compare processes and outcomes from the House and Senate. Dr. Kelly and I traveled to Washington during the last week of September 2010 to locate and photograph these request letters. We also took advantage of this trip to Washington (funded by an external grant from the Dirksen Center) to conduct additional interviews for the book and the accompanying web site. The acquisition of these data in the form of over 10,000 photographed pages, represent the end of the data collection phase of the project.

A good deal of my time during the sabbatical period was devoted to entering data on House Interior Subcommittee earmark requests into a relational database that has been developed for our project. For our future statistical analysis, we have entered the name, location, sponsor, dollar amount and account information for earmark project requested as well as the fate of those requests after consideration by the relevant subcommittee. To date, we have entered all of these descriptors for nearly 20,000 cases (with the assistance of a group of CI students).

In addition, considerable time was devoted to reading the expansive literature on congressionally directed spending and the federal budget process. I also did considerable reading of historical accounts of the birth and development of earmarks in several key areas that will be the focus of the book – in particular projects such as lighthouses, military bases, National Park and public land construction and river and harbor improvements. Based on this extensive review of the literature, I have completed a draft of Chapter 3 (Legislative Earmarks), which will be the descriptive chapter of the book documenting the historic evolution of earmarking and its present day characteristics.

This chapter focuses on three things. First, it pulls back the curtain to illustrate the earmark process. Based on interviews, archival evidence, and earmark data it discusses important contextual concerns: Where do earmarks come from? How does an earmark get into a subcommittee bill? How do members ensure that their earmarks stay in the final bill? Second, we describe the quantitative data that are used throughout the analysis; which projects are included in the data as earmarks and which are excluded and why. Finally the bulk of the chapter provides descriptive analysis of the programmatic areas that will be examined throughout the rest of the book and a somewhat extended discussion of the historical development and evolution of earmarks.

Finally, I also began editing and expanding chapter 2, (Distributive Theory and the Pork Barrel) during the sabbatical semester. Chapter 2 summarizes the current theoretical literature on earmarks, and as the literature continues to expand, our original 2007 paper which forms the core of this chapter has need revision and expansion. This area has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention in recent years, particularly following the requirement that Congress print all funded earmarks by dollar amount and location in committee reports.

During the sabbatical semester, I made considerable progress on the book project. Faculty in the teaching intensive environment of the California State University often find it difficult to be productive scholars while fulfilling the countless other demands. I am thankful to the Sabbatical Leave Committee, the Provost and the President of the University, for funding this opportunity which will enable me to produce a book that will be published by one of the top academic publishers in my field.