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Explanatory Journalism

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Fixing the U.S. Congress by Embracing Earmarks

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Republicans' Gift to President Obama

- 2010 Republican pledge to eliminate earmarks
- 2011 Republicans make good on their promise
- Goals:
 - Reduce spending
 - Reduce deficits
 - Reduce corruption
- Motivated by Tea Party influence

Earmarks Debate

- Republican-led effort
- Bipartisan support and opposition
- Involved legislative & constitutional concerns

Sen. Inhofe, Earmark Defender

“An across-the-board ban has the unintended consequence of eliminating useful spending.”

“To be clear, there are many earmarks that should be defeated. But we should defeat them based on their substance — not because they are earmarks.”

“Instead of ceding Congress’s constitutional authority to the president, we should hold Obama accountable and be responsive to our constituents.”

Source: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/45023.html#ixzz3EwFtUd5q>

Overview of Talk

- I. What are earmarks? Politics and Policy
- II. The value of earmarks
- III. An earmark ban: problems and consequences
- IV. What an earmark ban means for Nevada
- V. Conclusion

A History of Earmarks

- A tradition as old as the Republic
- Exist at the local, state and federal levels
- Earmarks can be Congressional or Presidential
- The New Deal & the expansion of government
- 1980s-2000s, Congress gets addicted
- Mid-2000s-Present, earmarks are vilified

Purpose of Earmarks

- Target funding for local concerns
- A way to employ legislators' understanding of public needs
- Credit claiming & the electoral connection
- A means of restraining executive power

Earmarks and Corruption

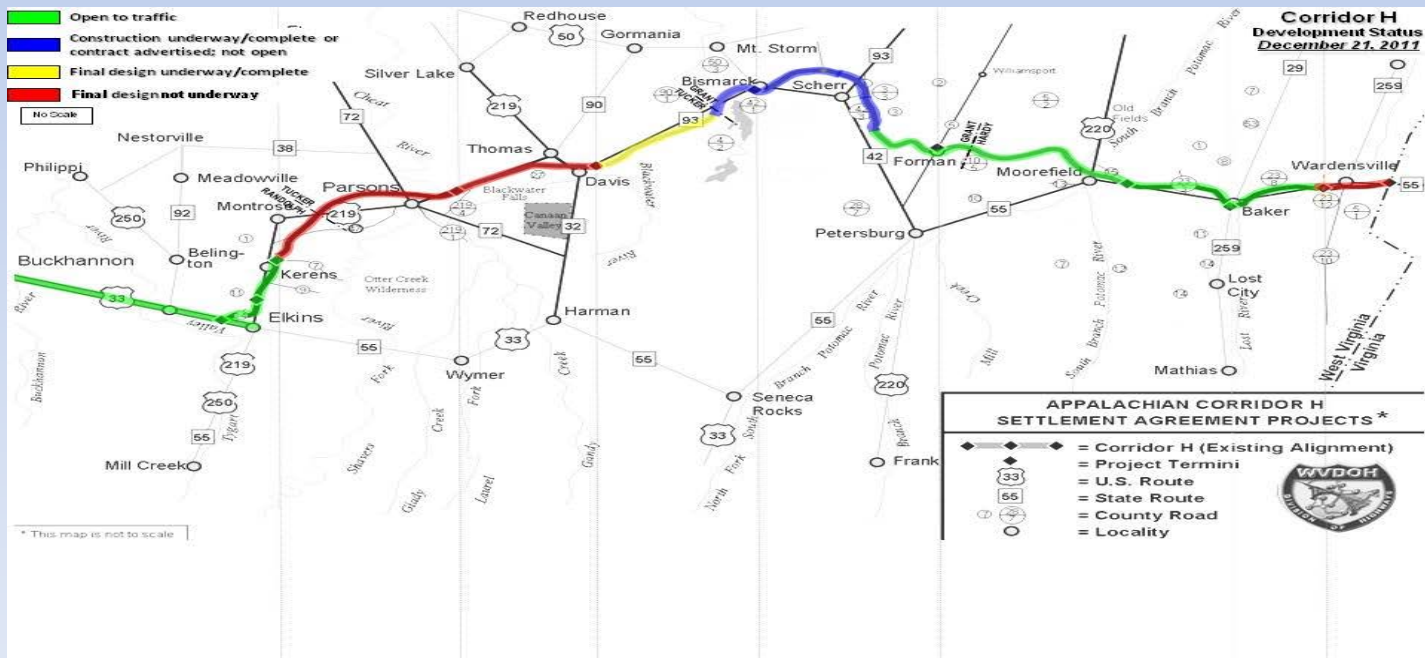
- Kickbacks for elected officials and interests
- Self-serving earmarks
- Advantages within each chamber of Congress

The Politics of Earmarks

- Congressional earmarks
 - Provisions within bills
 - Provisions within amendments
 - Provisions within committee reports
 - Formal versus informal earmarks
- Executive/Presidential earmarks
 - White House influence
 - Appointee influence

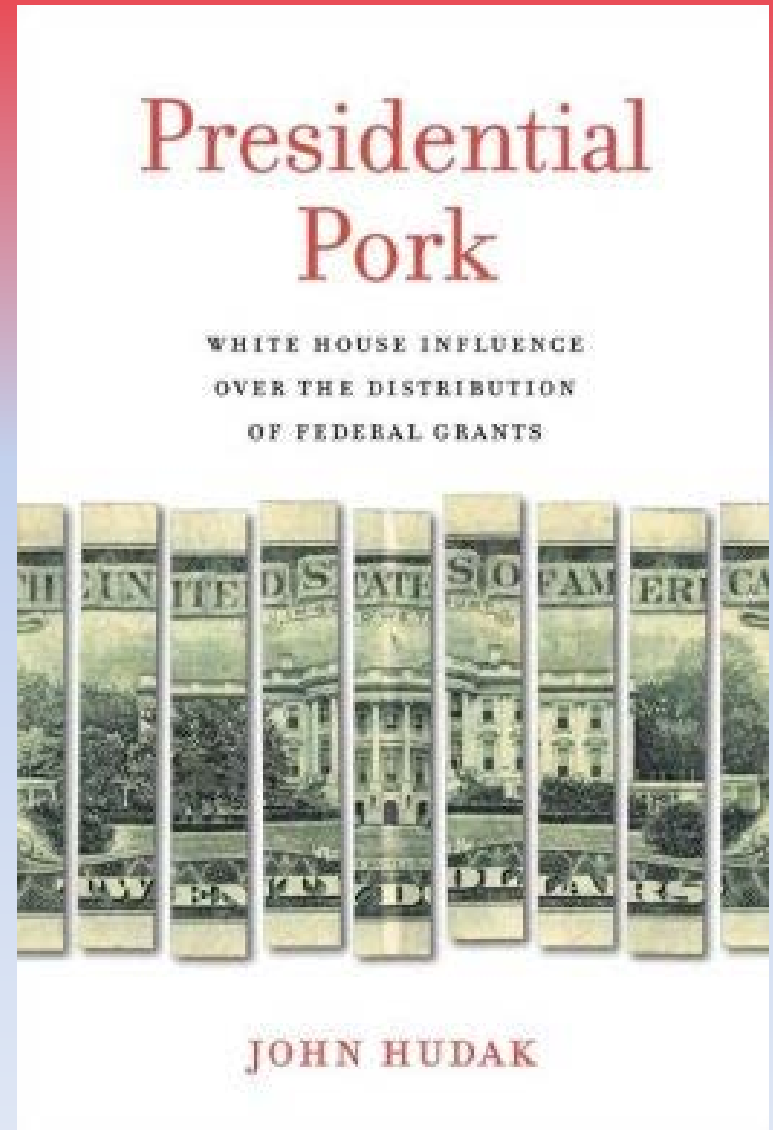
Who Benefits from Earmarks?

- Congressional earmarks
 - Senior members
 - Small state senators
 - Vulnerable incumbents
 - Party leaders
 - Committee chairs
 - Public



Who Benefits from Earmarks?

- Presidential Earmarks
 - Swing states
 - Key constituencies
 - Home states
 - Policy constituencies
 - Me!



What Earmarks are NOT!

- Automatic budget growers
- Automatic deficit growers
- Automatically corrupt
- Automatically waste, fraud and abuse
- Bad for America

Everyone Should Embrace Pork!



The Democratic Value of Earmarks

- Responsiveness to local concerns
- Connects the public to their legislators
- Addresses public needs with public funds
- Can overcome bureaucratic challenges
- Helps voters assess their elected officials

The Legislative Value of Earmarks

- Helps coalition building
- Can break gridlock
- Forces negotiation, coordination, communication
- Links legislators by similar interests, efforts
- Unites members across parties

The Budgetary Value of Earmarks

- Clear divisions of funding
- Incentives to limit budget growth
- Motivates Congressional oversight

The Fallout of an Earmark Ban

The Legislative Branch

- Slows or stops the legislative process
- Less attention to appropriations process
- Stifles cooperation & collaboration
- Has no effect on budgets or deficits
- Weakens Congress' constitutional role

The Fallout of an Earmark Ban

The Executive Branch

- Empowers the president
- Empowers appointees
- Empowers “unelected bureaucrats”
- Dramatically reduces transparency
- Dramatically affects *who gets what and when*

Earmark Bans Can Hurt States

- State need varies
- State capacity varies
- Some states struggle with competitive processes
- Earmarks can overcome state-level dysfunction
- The earmark ban can hurt states like Nevada

The Importance of Earmarks for Nevada

- Direct help from Congressional delegation
 - Senate Majority Leader
 - 2 members in the House majority
 - 1 House majority member in a swing district
- Helps Senator Reid move legislation
 - Increases opportunities for additional benefits

The Importance of Earmarks for Senate Leaders

- Coalition building is difficult in any legislature
- Coalition building is particularly difficult in the US Senate
- Senate Leaders tend to hail from small states, where earmarks are of particular use

Earmarks: Just What the Dr. Ordered

- Congress must eliminate the earmark ban
- Reform the earmarks process
 - Increase transparency
 - Ban earmarking when conflicts of interest are present
 - Engage public on benefits and risks of earmarks
 - Empower the Appropriations Committees to play a central role

Earmarks: Just What the Dr. Ordered

- Earmarks are a small price for an improved legislative environment
- Is it pretty? No.
- Is it better than the current situation? Anything is.
- Earmarks won't fix everything that is wrong with Congress, but it certainly cannot make it worse.