Moochers and Makers in the Voting Booth: Who Benefits from Federal Spending, and How Did They Vote in the 2004 Through 2012 Presidential Elections?

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Abstract

Recent US presidential election campaigns popularized the claim that people who benefit from federal spending -- the moochers -- vote for Democrats, while people who fund the government -- the makers -- vote Republican. Surveys conducted during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections contained questions to test this hypothesis and to assess the accuracy of voters' perceptions of federal spending. Family income, age, employment status, and number of children in a household determine people's perceptions of their benefit from federal spending across all three elections. White voters were more likely than non-whites to believe that they benefit from federal spending in 2004, but in 2012 whites were less likely than non-whites to believe they benefit from federal spending. Voters' perceptions of their dependence on federal spending are unrelated to vote choice in the three presidential elections, with the exception that senior citizens who benefit from federal spending were more likely to vote Democratic in 2012 than seniors who do not benefit. Among non-seniors, moochers and makers vote Democratic at about the same levels. In all three elections, indirect beneficiaries of federal spending – measured as the ratio of federal spending to taxes paid in a voter's state – are more likely to vote Republican.

During the 2012 presidential election campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney told a group of supporters, “There are 47 percent who are with [President Obama], who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.” Romney’s comment about the “47 percent” is derived from the percentage of Americans who did not pay income taxes in 2011 (Tax Policy Center), but it reflects a broader perception that the Republican party represents people who pay more taxes than they receive in federal benefits – the makers – while the Democratic party represents people who receive more in government benefits more than they pay in taxes – the moochers.

Campaign rhetoric aside, perceptions of the federal budget present an important test case for theories of voting. Harold Lasswell defined politics as “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell 1935). If voters are self-interested, beneficiaries of federal spending should, in theory, vote for candidates who pledge to protect or expand federal programs, while voters who lose money to the federal government should prefer candidates who promise to cut taxes and reduce spending. Do American voters carry the politics of “who gets what” into the voting booth?

Uncovering whether people are moochers or makers is difficult given lack of data matching federal benefits, taxes paid, and vote choice at the individual level. This project takes a different approach by asking people directly whether they believe they are net contributors or net beneficiaries in the federal ledger. Surveys conducted during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections included questions asking people whether their family is a net beneficiary of or net contributor to the federal budget. This paper assesses the accuracy of these perceptions – they do seem to be accurate – and uses them to explain vote choice in recent presidential elections. Voters' perceptions of whether they benefit from federal spending are generally unrelated to their votes. Both moochers and makers are about equally likely to vote Democratic or Republican, which contradicts popular accounts and campaign rhetoric about the types of voters who support each of the parties.

Section 1 describes the 2004 through 2012 election survey instruments and assesses their validity. Section 2 presents results from model of vote choice and party identification that includes public perceptions of benefit from federal spending. Section 3 discusses implications for party competition, budget politics, and theories of voter behavior.

Measuring Perceptions of Benefit from Federal Spending

Survey questions measuring a family's benefit from federal spending could present the benefit in retrospective, prospective, or current terms. A retrospective approach might ask, "Have you received more in benefits than you have paid in taxes over the course of your lifetime?" A prospective question might ask, "Does the benefit you expect to receive over the course of your lifetime exceed what you expect to pay in taxes over your lifetime?" The survey questions in this study measure current benefit by framing the issue to respondents as: "At this point in time, are you paying more in taxes or receiving more in benefits?" The current perspective on the question is simpler and more straightforward for respondents to answer, requires them to make fewer assumptions about the past and present, and is also more consistent with common conceptions of "moochers." Given the prospective question, different respondents could answer differently not due to their beliefs about their budget "status," but due to their expectations about the future, such as the continued viability of Social Security. In the retrospective question, the past is past and may no longer be relevant to current fiscal preferences.

Data for this study come from a 2004 Knowledge Networks survey and the 2008 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Surveys (hereafter CCES). The 2004 Knowledge Networks survey is based on a sample Knowledge Networks recruited from over 50,000 subjects nationwide to participate in surveys administered by WebTV. The computer format of the survey allows respondents to complete surveys at their leisure, and often results in more reliable and valid responses than telephone interviews (Chang and Krosnick 2009). A random sample of the Knowledge Networks panel was chosen to participate in the three-wave survey, with Wave 1 conducted April 27-May 31 (N=1308); Wave 2, September 17-October 7 (N=947); and Wave 3, November 19-December 3, 2004 (N=717). A sample of 211 new respondents also completed interviews in Wave 3. Completion rates were 76 percent in Wave 1, 85 percent in Wave 2, and 77 percent in Wave 3.

The April-May wave of the survey contained the question,

> "Think about all of the taxes you pay to the federal government, such as income taxes and Social Security taxes. Also think about how much money you get from the federal government in Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid, salary or wages if you are employed by the government, farm subsidies, education loans, veterans' benefits, or anything else. Would you say that you get more money from the

federal government than you pay in taxes, do you pay more taxes that you get back, or do you not know?"

Only 5.6 of percent of the 1308 respondents refused to answer the question or said "do not know." Of the respondents who did answer the question, 23.4 percent believe that they receive more from the federal government than they pay in taxes while the remaining 76.4 percent believe that they pay more.

Data from 2008 and 2012 come from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES). The 2008 and 2012 CCES are an opt-in surveys conducted over the Internet by YouGov/ Polimetrix. Each sample is weighted to match the 2008 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The CCES questions were part of a two-wave panel given to a randomly selected 1,000 respondents in the CCES sample. Wave 1 (N=1000) was fielded between October 1 and the day before Election Day in each year. All respondents to Wave 1 were invited to participate in Wave 2. In 2008, Wave 2 (N=826) was conducted between November 3, 2008, and January 5, 2009, with 95 percent of interviews completed before December 1, 2008. In 2012, Wave 2 (N=822) was conducted between November 7, 2012, and January 6, 2013, with 96 percent of interviews completed before December 1, 2012.

To measure public perceptions of benefit from federal spending, Wave 1 of both the 2008 and 2012 surveys included a question similar the 2004 question, but with "Pay about the same amount in taxes as we get back from the government" as an additional response option:

"Think about all the taxes you and your family pay to the U.S. federal government, such as income taxes and Social Security taxes. Also think about

> how much money you and your family get from the federal government in Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid, salary or wages if you are employed by the federal government or military, farm subsidies, education loans, veterans' benefits, or anything else. Would you say that you and your family get more money from the federal government than you pay in taxes, do you pay more in taxes than you get back, or do you pay about the same amount in taxes as you get back from the government?”

In the 2008 survey, of the 981 respondents who answered the question, 68.0 percent believe that they pay more in taxes than their family receives from the government, making them net contributors to the government. Another 17.0 percent believe that they pay about the same in taxes as they receive. Only 15.0 percent believe that they are net beneficiaries of federal spending since their family receives more from the government than they pay in taxes.

In 2012, of the 986 respondents who answered the question, 56.5 percent believe they pay more in taxes than their family receives in spending. 24.8 percent believe they pay about the same in taxes as they receive in spending, while 18.7 percent believe they receive more from the federal government than they pay in taxes.

Table 1 presents perceptions of federal spending benefit across the three elections. In all three years, the majority of respondents believe they are makers, not moochers. Depending on the year and question wording, only about 15 to 24 percent of Americans think of themselves as beneficiaries of federal spending. The table also shows a pattern of over-time change that reflects changes in the economy and the budget. The percentages of respondents who believe they are net contributors to the government clearly declined from 2008 to 2012. The percentage of respondents who believe they break even or benefit from spending both increase from 2008 to 2012, though with a larger increase among people who believe they break even. Job loss, income loss, and the stock market decline lowered many people's tax bills during the 2008 recession. Given government stimulus programs following the recession, it makes sense that more people would think of themselves as beneficiaries or budget neutrals in 2012 than in 2008.

It is difficult to know if these perceptions of taxes and spending are accurate. Families may underestimate their benefit from federal spending, overestimate their taxes paid, or both. We have little way to know how much individuals really receive in federal spending compared to their taxes paid. It is especially difficult to calculate an individual's indirect benefits from federal spending, such as law enforcement, national defense, environmental protection, and subsidies for roads, education, agriculture, and housing.

One way to assess the accuracy of these perceptions is to test whether they are explained in a multivariate model by variables that generally determine a person's eligibility for many federal programs and tax breaks. The dependent variable in this model has three values in 2008 and 2012: (1) a respondent believes her family pays more in taxes than it receives from the government, (2) pays about the same in taxes as it receives in spending, or (3) receives more from the federal government than it pays in taxes. In 2004, due to the lack of a "pay about the same" response, the dependent variable is binary.[1]

[1] The statistical model is an ordered logit for 2008 and 2012 and a binary logit for 2004.

The explanatory variables are socio-economic factors that determine eligibility for some of the larger federal spending programs, plus political variables that frequently filter political perceptions. Family income should be negatively related to net benefit from federal spending. Higher income families generally pay a higher income tax rate, though a lower percentage of income in payroll taxes, and they are less likely to be eligible for means-tested social programs. Having a full time job should also be negatively related to net benefit. Conversely, people who are retired, unemployed, or working part time should be more likely to benefit from federal spending. Age should have a curvilinear relationship with benefit from federal spending, first declining in its effect on net benefit, then increasing as a person hits retirement age and older due to the availability of retirement benefits such as Social Security. The number of children in a family under age 18 should be positively related to net benefit from federal spending due to the income tax credit per child, tax credits for child care, the Children's Health Insurance Program, Food Stamps, Head Start, college loans, and other programs. People who have served or have immediate family members who have served in the military are also likely beneficiaries of federal spending. A three category dummy variable separates respondents into those who personally served in the military and those who have family members who served, with a baseline of respondents who have not served and have no family members who served. Education level is also in the model, but its expected effect on federal benefit is less clear.

Political and demographic variables may also predict a person's perception of benefit from federal spending. Race will predict perceived benefit if white respondents are less likely than others to believe they benefit from federal spending. The media and politicians frequently portray welfare recipients as minorities (Gilens 2009), and whites tend to associate government spending with programs that benefit minorities (Jacoby 1994).

A person's party identification may also explain their perceived benefit from federal spending. One reason for this link may be pure self-interest. People who benefit from federal spending may support Democrats to protect their benefits, while people who do not benefit may support Republicans to lower taxes. The link between partisanship and perceptions of federal spending may also be rhetorical. If partisans mimic the rhetoric of their party's leaders, or if the party leaders' rhetoric panders to the sentiments of their supporters, Republicans will be more likely to believe that they are net contributors to the government and Democrats will be more likely to believe they are beneficiaries.

An additional variable may explain voters' perceptions of their benefit from federal spending: their home state's actual benefit from federal spending. Total federal taxes paid from each state in each year are available from the Internal Revenue Service.[2] Total federal spending in each state is measured in the year prior to the election using the US Bureau of Census in the Consolidated Federal Funds Report (2003, 2007, and 2010).

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[2] Total taxes paid are reported separately from total tax refunds to a state in a year. We calculate total taxes as taxes paid minus refunds received. Congress ended reporting of federal spending in the Consolidated Federal Funds report after 2010. Therefore, the 2010 taxing and spending data are used to calculate a state's net take from the federal government. Federal spending ratios per state change very little from year to year, although over decades they change somewhat (Lacy 2013).

A state's benefit from federal spending is measured as total spending in a state divided by total taxes paid from the state. In 2012, this figure ranges from a low of $0.53 for Delaware to a high of $3.67 for New Mexico. The median states, Tennessee and North Carolina, received $1.55 and $1.58 in federal spending for every dollar paid in taxes.

Table 2 reports the results of the models.[3] We focus here simply on the signs and significance of the explanatory variables across years. Most of the expected relationships appear between demographic variables and perceived spending benefit. People who are older, working full-time, or earning higher incomes believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in federal spending since those coefficients are all negative and statistically significant across all three years. The square of age has a positive coefficient in all years indicating a non-linear effect where older Americans begin to receive more in federal spending than they pay in taxes.[4] The number of children under 18 in a family is positively related to perceived benefit from federal spending in all four years. The effects of these variables confirm that the questions are generally valid measures of a person's benefit from federal spending since eligibility for many federal spending programs depends on age, income, employment status, and number of dependents.

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[3] Models are estimated on five multiply-imputed data sets due to missing observations on family income. All other missing observations are people who did not vote or did not have an intended vote choice in the pre-election survey. Estimates are averages of the estimates from the five data sets, with standard errors adjusted (King, et al. 2001).

[4] Estimating the model with age in years replaced by a dummy variable for people over the age of 65 shows a large positive and statistically significant effect.

Other demographic variables show inconsistent effects over time. Race has a surprising relationship with perceived federal spending benefit over time. In 2004, whites believe they benefit from federal spending, in 2008 there is no effect of race on perceptions, but in 2012 whites believe they do not benefit from federal spending. Conversely, in 2004, non-whites are more likely than whites to believe they benefit from federal spending, but in 2012 they are more likely to believe they benefit.

The change in the direction of the parameter on race from 2004 to 2012 reflects a change in the perceptions of both whites and non-whites. In 2004, 25.7 percent of whites believe they benefit from federal spending, compared to 17 percent of non-whites. Four years later, these perceptions switched. In 2008, 15.8 percent of whites believe they benefit from federal spending, compared to 12.8 percent of non-whites. At the same time, 17.2 percent of whites believe they break even in the federal budget, compared to 16.2 percent of non-whites. A much more significant change occurred by 2012. The percentage of people who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending jumped to 25.7 percent among non-whites but remained fairly steady at 16.3 percent among whites. The percentages of people who believe they pay as much in taxes as they receive in spending also jumped among non-whites to 34.9 percent, compared to 25.9 percent among whites. In 2012, only 39.4 percent of whites consider themselves net contributors to the federal budget, a significant drop from 71 percent in 2004. A significant shift in perceptions of federal spending occurred among non-whites between 2008 and 2012.

The most obvious explanation for the changing effect of race on perceptions of federal spending is the match between the respondent's race and the incumbent president's race. In 2004, with a white president running for reelection, whites are more likely than non-whites to believe they benefit from federal spending. In 2012, with an African-American president running for reelection, non-whites are more likely than whites to believe that they benefit from federal spending. Since 2008 lacked an incumbent presidential candidate, race has no effect on perceived spending benefit. Nothing about the qualifications for federal programs based on race changed between 2004 and 2008. The changing effect of race is likely due to rationalization rather than to reality. This is an important and potentially far-reaching finding for the relationship between perceived spending benefit and race.

Military service – either by the respondent or a family member – is unrelated to perceived benefit from federal spending except in 2008. Respondents who served in the military are more likely in 2008 to believe that they receive more from the government than they pay in taxes. But in 2004 and 2012 there is no relationship between military service and perceived spending benefit.

A state's federal spending ratio is unrelated to a voter's perceived family benefit from federal spending in any year. To the extent that a state's spending to taxes ratio captures the indirect effect of federal spending near a voter's home – military bases, national parks, grants, federal public works projects – people do not include these in their perceptions of personal benefit from federal spending. State spending ratio aside, the "objective" predictors of personal benefit from federal spending strongly suggest that people's perceptions are partly accurate or at least responsive to the things that determine "who gets what."

Party identification is generally unrelated to perceived spending benefit. Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans or Independents to believe that they receive more in spending than they pay in taxes in 2012, but not in 2004 or 2008. The changing effect of partisanship, like the effect of race, could be due to rationalizing since 2012 is the only election year with an incumbent Democratic administration. Republicans and Independents are statistically indistinguishable in their perceptions of benefit from federal spending across all three elections. Party identification explains so many things in American political behavior that it is surprising not to see a more pronounced effect on perceptions of federal spending.

Two results stand out in the models. First, people's perceptions of federal spending reflect the real world. Respondents who probably should believe they benefit from federal spending do, including those with lower income, not employed full time, seniors, and parents of several children. If the effect of family income, age, job status, and number of children in a household are "slope" effects in a model, capturing how much a voter's perception of federal spending changes as each of these variables change, then what is the intercept or threshold at which voters believe they are no longer contributors to the federal government but beneficiaries? This intercept may be lower in voter's perceptions than it is in reality. To borrow Mettler's (2011) description, it may be "submerged," with many voters personally benefitting from federal spending before they realize it.

Second, race colors voters perceptions of federal spending. The reflection of the real world is partly influenced by the perceptual filter of race, but in ways that the literature on perceptions of welfare suggests. Jacoby (1994) shows that white voters associate the words "government spending" with programs that benefit minorities. Gilens (2009) provides evidence that white voters should be less likely than non-whites to believe that they benefit from federal spending due to media and politicians who portray welfare recipients as black.

Perceptions of Federal Spending Benefit and the Presidential Vote

Did voters' perceptions of their dependence on federal spending influence their vote in recent presidential election? Conventional wisdom, reflected in Mitt Romney's comment during the 2012 election about the 47 percent of Americans who are dependent on government, holds that people who benefit from federal programs or do not pay much in taxes vote Democratic. Little if any academic research has examined the accuracy of this claim.[5] The questions about perceptions of benefit from federal spending that appeared on the 2004 through 2012 surveys reflect individual benefit from federal spending at least partially since they vary systematically with the things that ought to predict federal spending benefit.

A first step toward assessing whether moochers vote Democratic and makers vote Republican is the two-party vote for net contributors, net beneficiaries, and, in 2008 and 2012, the "budget neutrals," or people who believe that the spending they receive equals the taxes they pay. In 2004, among the 23 percent of the voting sample who benefit from federal spending, the two-party vote was 53.8 percent for Democrat John Kerry and 46.2 percent for Republican George W. Bush. In contrast, the net contributors voted 51.4 percent to 48.6 percent for Bush. The difference in vote choice between the contributors and beneficiaries is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(1)=1.08$, $p=.30$).

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[5] Lacy (2014) examines the 2012 US presidential election and finds no effect of perceived federal spending benefit on vote choice for voters under age 65.

In 2008, the 16.7 percent of voters who benefit from federal spending voted 58.8 percent for Barack Obama and 41.2 percent for John McCain. The 16.6 of voters who broke even in federal spending benefit gave Obama 56.0 percent of their votes. Net contributors, comprising 66.7 percent of the electorate, voted 51.5 percent to 48.5 percent in favor of Obama. The differences across the groups are not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2)=2.30$, $p=.32$).

In the 2012 election, the 17.8 percent of voters who believe they benefit from federal spending voted 54.7 percent for Obama and 46.3 percent for Republican challenger Mitt Romney. Of the 57 percent of the sample who believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in spending, Romney won by a margin of 51.9 percent to Obama's 48.1 percent. The 24.9 percent of people who believe they pay about the same in taxes as they receive in spending show the most surprising result: 59.6 percent voted for Obama and 40.4 percent for Romney. The differences in presidential vote across the categories of federal spending benefit is statistically significant in this one year, but only because of the high support for Obama among people in the budget neutral group.

Table 3 presents the two-party vote in each election for each group of spending beneficiary. Democratic Advantage is the difference in Democratic share of the two-party vote between moochers and makers. In all three elections, the net beneficiaries, or moochers, cast only marginally more votes for Democratic candidates than Republicans. In 2004, the Democratic vote among moochers was 5.2 percentage points higher than among makers (53.8 percent minus 48.6 percent). In 2008, Democrats had a 7.3 percentage point advantage among moochers compared to makers. In 2012 the Democratic advantage among moochers was 6.6 percentage points. None of these differences are significant in the purely statistical sense. The bottom of the table presents the two-party vote in the election compared to the two-party vote in the survey samples. In all three years, the survey sample closely matches the election outcome.

Substantively, the results could be significant, depending on one's perspective. Republicans could argue that people who benefit from federal spending are more likely to vote for Democrats than for Republicans. In each of the three elections, Democrats won a majority of voters who benefit from federal spending. In only one election — 2008 — did Republicans fail to win a majority of net contributors to federal spending. Republicans could further argue that the expansion of federal spending to make more people dependent on government could create an electoral advantage for Democrats.

Democrats could argue that the small percentage of voters who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending is only slightly more Democratic than the rest of the electorate. Also, at least 48 percent of voters who believe they benefit from federal spending voted Republican in each election. Democrats could also point to their winning margins among the budget neutrals as evidence that cutting federal spending would help them rather than Republicans.

From the perspective of a political scientist, these results suggest that there is no appreciable difference in the voting patterns of moochers and makers. Self-identified beneficiaries of federal spending present a "conservative" test of the hypothesis that moochers are more likely to vote Democratic since net beneficiaries who vote Republican may be less likely to self-identify as dependent on government, especially in 2012 given the stigma Romney attached to dependence during the campaign. The subjective nature of respondents' assessments of their federal spending may make more Democrats claim to benefit from federal spending and fewer Republicans, leading the self-assessments of dependence on government to overestimate its relationship to party identification and the vote.

A further complication is that voters who believe they are budget neutral are the most Democratic-leaning in the 2012 electorate. This group poses at least two problems for subsequent analysis. First, the effect of perceived spending benefit on vote choice is non-linear. In the multivariate analysis of vote choice that follows, federal spending benefit appears in the statistical models as a set of dummy variables rather than an ordered scale.

The second problem is the counterfactual "what if?" Would Republicans have fared better in the 2008 and 2012 election were government spending much lower and far fewer people receiving federal benefits? The tempting answer is to say that Republicans would reap more votes if fewer people depended on government spending and needed a Democratic president to protect it. However, were government programs eliminated and taxes cut, more voters will move to the "budget neutral" category of federal benefit, not the net contributors category. Voters who neither gain nor lose from federal spending and taxes voted overwhelmingly Democratic in the 2012 election. This poses a conundrum for both Republican and Democratic candidates. According to the survey results, a reduction in federal spending and taxes could help Democratic presidential candidates and hurt Republicans.

The aggregate vote shares of moochers and makers in an election may not capture the full relationship between federal spending benefit and vote choice. People over the age of 65 may view dependence on government spending differently from younger voters. People who receive Social Security and Medicare payments may believe that they are net beneficiaries of government spending, but that they paid for their benefits over the course of their working lifetimes. They are not dependent on government as much as they are receiving back what they contributed. The "47 percent" in popular understanding likely excludes senior citizens and instead captures the image of younger and middle age people on welfare.

A multivariate model provides a more detailed assessment of the relationship between vote choice and federal spending in both its individual and aggregate form. The individual-level measure of federal spending benefit is a voter's response to the survey item, which enters the models as separate dummy variables for net beneficiaries and budget neutrals. Given the difference in how seniors and non-seniors may conceptualize their benefits, the model contains an interaction of senior (65 years or older) with federal spending benefit. The interaction captures the conditional effect of spending benefit separately for seniors and non-seniors.

Voters may also benefit indirectly from aggregate federal spending close to home. Federal grants, procurement contracts, military bases and office buildings, and other spending items indirectly benefit voters by pumping dollars into the state or local economy. A state's ratio of federal spending to taxes in the year before the election captures a voter's indirect benefit from federal spending.

Party identification and perceived spending benefit are related, as Table 2 shows, but the direction of causality is unclear. People who benefit from federal spending may identify as Democrats, or Democrats may be more likely (or Republicans and Independents less likely) to recognize or to admit that they benefit from federal spending.

To account for the potentially reciprocal relationship between party identification and spending benefit, the model is a bivariate probit with two equations, one for vote choice, the other for party identification (Democrat versus Republican or Independent measured in the post-election survey). Each equation contains a voter's self-reported federal spending benefit and race (white versus non-white) as well as the state spending ratio.

Results from the model appear in Tables 4, 5, and 6, for 2004, 2008, and 2012, respectively. The coefficients for the interaction of age and spending benefit are compared to the baseline category of non-seniors who believe they are net contributors. In 2004, non-senior net beneficiaries are no different from net contributors in their vote choice or party identification. Senior net contributors are more likely than non-senior net contributors to vote for the Democrat and to identify as Democrats, but this effect is due more to age than to contribution from federal spending. Among seniors, there is no difference between the moochers and makers in vote choice or party identification since the coefficients for the two groups are not statistically different.

In 2008 and 2012, the category of "budget neutral" appears in the model due to the change in question wording. In both years, non-senior budget neutrals are more likely than net contributors to identify as Democrats, but there is no difference in party affiliation between moochers and makers. In the vote choice equation in 2008, moochers are more likely than makers to vote for Obama, but in 2012 there is no difference in vote choice between the two groups. In 2012, however, budget neutrals are much more likely to vote Democratic than either moochers or makers. Among seniors, there is no difference in the vote choice of moochers, makers, and budget neutrals in 2008. In 2012, senior contributors are less likely to vote for Obama than seniors who are budget neutral or beneficiaries.

The relationship between federal spending benefit, age, party identification, and vote choice is easier to see graphically. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the joint probability that a voter is a Democrat and votes for the Democratic candidate for each combination of spending benefit and age. The dot is the predicted probability that a voter is a Democrat and votes for the Democrat, while the horizontal bars in each graph represent the 95 percent credibility interval. In Figure 1, showing the 2004 election, the four groups of voters show overlapping credibility intervals. There is no significant difference in electoral behavior across the four groups, with the exception that senior beneficiaries are significantly more Democratic than non-senior contributors.

In Figure 2, showing 2008, no differences appear in the behavior of the six age and benefit combinations. Non-senior budget neutrals are the most Democratic-leaning voters with senior beneficiaries the most Republican-leaning, but with not statistically significant difference between the two groups. By 2012, shown in Figure 3, the non-senior budget neutrals are again the most Democratic, followed by senior beneficiaries. For non-seniors, the effect of federal spending benefit on vote choice and party identification is non-linear. Non-senior moochers and makers are no different from each other in their probability of voting for Obama and being Democrats. Non-seniors budget neutrals are more likely than either moochers or makers to vote for Obama and to identify as Democrats. The most pro-Obama voters are non-senior budget neutrals and senior beneficiaries. The group least likely to support Obama or identify as Democrats are seniors who believe they lose money to the government.

Several things may explain the difference between seniors and non-seniors in 2012. Seniors are more likely to vote for Romney regardless of whether they benefit from government programs. Sixty percent of seniors in the survey cast their votes for Romney, compared to 43 percent of non-seniors. Seniors who benefit from federal spending may have the most at stake in the federal budget since they have fewer alternatives to make up for lost government support than their non-senior counterparts. Seniors who do not benefit from government programs may have accumulated enough wealth -- only income, not wealth, is measured in most surveys -- that they see government programs as irrelevant to them but taxes as too high. Alternatively, some seniors may not view Social Security and Medicare as government benefits as much as they view them as recouping their lifetime of taxes paid. The pattern of voting among seniors in 2012 is the only result that appears to support the notion that beneficiaries of federal spending vote Democratic.

Voters under the age of 65, who are about 80 percent of the electorate in each election, pose the critical test for the hypothesis that moochers vote Democratic and makers vote Republican in presidential elections. The stereotype of someone who is dependent on government is not a senior citizen on Social Security, but a non-senior living on welfare. Yet benefiting from government spending has no effect on the probability of voting Democratic for people under the age of 65.

The ratio of federal spending received to tax dollars paid by a voter's state of residence measures a voter's indirect benefit from federal spending. Voters who live in states that receive more in federal spending per tax dollar were less likely to vote Democratic in every election year, even when controlling for the voter's own benefit from federal spending. This is a paradoxical result, but it is consistent with the aggregate level findings of Lacy (2002 and 2013) that the Republican presidential vote in a state increases with the state's benefit from federal spending. Voters who live in states that receive higher federal spending per tax dollar are more likely to reap the indirect benefits of federal spending than voters who live in states that pay more in taxes than they receive in spending. The effect of federal spending ratio on vote choice is not small. In 2012, for instance, a one dollar increase in federal spending per tax dollar – moving from Ohio's ratio of 1.0 to North Dakota's ratio of 2.03 – is associated with a .13 decrease in a voter's probability of voting for Obama. Spending ratio has a similar relationship with party identification. Voters who live in states that received more in federal spending per tax dollar are less likely to identify as Democrats. Not only is a voter's personal benefit from federal spending not a significant predictor of voting for Obama in 2012, but her likely indirect benefit from federal spending is significant as a predictor of voting for Romney.

Results from all three elections point to the same conclusion: Moochers and makers are no different from each other in the voting booth. Non-seniors who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending were just about as likely to vote for Democrats as for Republicans in 2004, 2008, and 2012. While moochers were slightly more likely to vote for Obama in 2012, and makers were slightly more likely to vote for Romney, the differences are not significant, and certainly not close to a wide gulf between the two types of voters. Voters of retirement age in 2012 do show a pattern of partisan support consistent with the moocher hypothesis. Seniors who are net beneficiaries of government spending vote Democratic while seniors who are net contributors vote Republican.

Implications

Do people's perceptions of their net benefit from federal spending match reality? The answer is a qualified yes. Individuals' perceptions of their family's benefit from federal spending are influenced by age, job status, income, and number of children. These same variables determine qualifications for many of the largest items in the federal budget – Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid – as well as smaller benefits such as food stamps, unemployment insurance, and housing assistance. At the very least, the public properly interprets the slope of benefits, or the things that determine who gets more or less in federal spending. But the threshold at which a person turns from a net contributor to a net beneficiary of federal spending – the intercept – may be underestimated by many people.

Race shows a strong influence on perceptions of benefit from federal spending. Race does not determine one's taxes paid or money received from the federal government *de jure*. There is no tax break or spending program for which race is a qualification, thus no reason to expect that race would have an impact on perceptions of benefit after controlling for income, age, education, and job status. Yet in 2004, with a white president, white voters were more likely than non-whites to believe that they benefit from federal spending. In 2008, with no incumbent running, race has no effect on perceptions of spending benefit. In 2012, with an African-American incumbent running, non-white voters are more likely to believe that they benefit from federal spending. This unexpected effect of race on perceptions of federal spending begs further analysis across different electoral contexts.

Do people who believe they benefit from federal spending vote Democratic while people who believe they are net contributors to the federal government vote Republican? For the one fifth of American voters age 65 and over, a partisan divide does appear between net contributors and net beneficiaries, but only in 2012. For the remaining 80 percent of voters, the effect of federal spending on vote choice is inconsistent across the election years. In 2008 net beneficiaries were more likely to vote for Barack Obama than for John McCain in the model controlling for race and state federal spending benefit (Table 3). In 2012, the difference between moochers and makers disappeared while budget neutrals emerged as the most Democratic-leaning voters. The partisan divide on perceptions of who benefits from federal spending may be large in Congress and among political elites, but it is much smaller among American voters.

One explanation for the lack of a relationship between perceptions of the budget and the vote is that the federal budget is so deeply entrenched, unchangeable, and protected by both parties that voters do not link presidential elections to their benefit from the budget. Social Security, Medicare, and other large social programs are non-discretionary. The president cannot change them, nor can Congress without a change in the law governing those benefits. Smaller programs, such as grants and procurement, are open to presidential influence (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010), but contribute little to the average voter's benefit from the budget. Furthermore, the states that receive the most in federal spending per tax dollar have voted Republican in recent presidential elections (Lacy 2012). Congressional Republicans sponsor as many earmarks for their states as

Democrats. For example, in FY 2010 the number and dollar amount of single-sponsor earmarks in the federal budget requested by Republican Senators were statistically no different than for Democratic Senators (Taxpayers for Common Sense 2010). Since their benefits from federal spending are unlikely to change regardless of the party of the president or Congress, voters are free to vote on other issues, disconnecting budget politics from the voting booth.

A second explanation for the absent connection between federal spending and vote choice is sociotropic voting. Perceptions of national economic conditions, not personal loss or gain, matter in the voting booth (Kinder and Keiweit 1981). Voters are moved more by their perceptions of the economic condition of the nation as a whole than by their own financial gain during a president's term. The same may be true of federal spending benefits. Moochers may think that cutting spending is better for the country as a whole even if not for them. Makers may believe that preserving spending programs is in the national interest even if it costs them at tax time.

The results from this study raise many practical questions for party strategies and the federal budget. Many Republican supporters are professed beneficiaries of federal spending. If they lose this benefit, will they continue to vote Republican? Many Democrats are net contributors to the federal government. If their taxes go up, will they continue to vote Democratic? If taxes and spending are cut, moving more voters into the category of budget neutral, will Democrats gain supporters? We do not know the price elasticity of partisanship: What is the trade-off partisans in the electorate are willing to make between losing financially due to their party's policies and staying loyal to their party due to other issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, or international relations? A substantial portion of the electorate faces a grim trade-off in current budget politics. Many Republican supporters stand to lose from cuts in social programs. Many Democrats will feel the pain of tax increases. Yet the federal budget insulates voters from the significant fiscal policy changes that presidential candidates pledge. A labyrinth of tax deductions and loopholes insulates wealthy Americans from tax increases associated with Democratic candidates. A cornucopia of federal spending programs – protected by members of Congress – insulates lower and middle income Americans from spending cuts that Republican candidates promise. The politics of taxing and spending do not divide Americans in the voting booth.

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Table 1: Perceptions of Federal Spending Benefit by Year

Federal Spending Benefit	*2004*	*2008*	*2012*
Net Contributor	76.4	68.0	56.5
Budget Neutral	--	17.0	24.8
Net Beneficiary	23.4	15.0	18.7
N	1235	981	986

Sources: 2004 Knowledge Networks Survey,
2008 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Table 2: Determinants of Self-Reported Net Benefit from Federal Spending

Independent Variables	2004	2008	2012
State Taxes:Spending Ratio	.15	.19	.08
	(.22)	(.18)	(.12)
White	.82*	.21	-.37*
	(.31)	(.18)	(.15)
Female	-.06	.14	-.05
	(.23)	(.17)	(.14)
Age	-.10	-.11*	-.10*
	(.04)*	(.03)	(.03)
Age-squared	.001	.001*	.001*
	(.0004)	(.0003)	(.0003)
Currently married	-.01	-.32*	-.07
	(.22)	(.16)	(.15)
Family income (1-16 scale)	-.13*	-.08*	-.07*
	(.03)	(.02)	(.03)
Full-time job	-.17	-.76*	-.39*
	(.24)	(.17)	(.17)
Education level (1-6 scale)	-.07	.09	-.05
	(.11)	(.05)	(.05)
Number of children under 18	.21*	.17*	.19*
	(.12)	(.07)	(.08)
Respondent military service	.13	.52*	-.34
	(.29)	(.25)	(.25)
Family member military service	.04	.11	-.31
	(.28)	(.17)	(.24)
Democrat	.25	-.01	.53*
	(.24)	(.18)	(.16)
Republican	-.09	-.25	-.26
	(.25)	(.19)	(.18)
Cut point 1 (Constant in 2004)	.86	-1.75*	-2.84*
	(.91)	(.67)	(.66)
Cut point 2	--	-.83	-1.48*
		(.67)	(.66)
N	681	956	930
LR Chi-2 (14)	105.8	115.3*	95.5*

Source: 2004 Knowledge Networks Survey and 2008 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, YouGov/Polimetrix. Entries are maximum likelihood estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses. * p<.05, two-tailed.

Table 3: Democratic Percentage of Two-Party by Perceived Federal Spending Benefit

Presidential Vote	*2004*	*2008*	*2012*
Net Contributor	48.6	51.5	48.1
Budget Neutral	----	56.0	59.6
Net Beneficiary	53.8	58.8	54.7
Democratic Advantage	5.2	7.3	6.6
Sample Vote	49.8	53.5	52.0
Actual Vote	48.8	53.7	52.0

Source: Sources: 2004 Knowledge Networks Survey, 2008 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, YouGov/Polimetrix.

Table 4: Bivariate Probit Model of Vote Choice and Party Identification in 2004 Presidential Election

Independent Variables	*Vote for Democrat*	*Identify as Democrat*
Non-Senior Net Contributor	.14 (.16)	.18 (.16)
Senior Net Beneficiary	.29 (.19)	.29 (.19)
Senior Net Contributor	.43* (.19)	.42* (.19)
White	-.74* (.15)	-.87* (.14)
Federal Spending Ratio in State	-.25* (.12)	-.12 (.12)
Constant	.82* (.19)	.41* (.19)
ρ	.73 (.04)	
Wald chi-square	49.1*	

Source: 2004 Knowledge Networks Survey. Entries are probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.
* indicates p < .05, two-tailed. N=564

Table 5: Bivariate Probit Model of Vote Choice and Party Identification in 2008 Presidential Election

Independent Variables	*Vote for Democrat*	*Identify as Democrat*
Non-Senior Budget Neutral	.28 (.15)	.32* (.14)
Non-Senior Net Beneficiary	.36* (.15)	.02 (.15)
Senior Net Contributor	-.28 (.15)	.06 (.15)
Senior Budget Neutral	-.10 (.26)	.15 (.25)
Senior Net Beneficiary	-.26 (.20)	-.02 (.20)
White	-.73* (.11)	-.60* (.11)
Federal Spending Ratio in State	-.29* (.12)	-.21 (.12)
Constant	.88* (.16)	.32* (.16)
ρ	.86 (.02)	
Wald chi-square (14)	88.4*	

Source: 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, YouGov/Polimetrix. Entries are probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. * indicates p < .05, two-tailed. N=807

Table 6: Bivariate Probit Model of Vote Choice and Party Identification in 2012 Presidential Election

Independent Variables	*Vote for Democrat*	*Identify as Democrat*
Non-Senior Budget Neutral	.49*	.38*
	(.15)	(.15)
Non-Senior Net Beneficiary	.10	.13
	(.16)	(.16)
Senior Net Contributor	-.49*	-.28
	(.17)	(.17)
Senior Budget Neutral	-.10	-.20
	(.18)	(.20)
Senior Net Beneficiary	.09	.38
	(.21)	(.20)
White	-.67*	-.54*
	(.14)	(.13)
Federal Spending Ratio in State	-.35*	-.37*
	(.09)	(.09)
Constant	1.09*	.69
	(.21)	(.19)
ρ	.89	
	(.02)	
Wald chi-square	81.44*	

Source: 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, YouGov/Polimetrix.
Entries are probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.
* indicates p < .05, two-tailed. N=642

Figure 1: The Effect of Voter Age and Government Spending Benefit on the Probability of Voting Democratic and Identifying as a Democrat in the 2004 Presidential Election

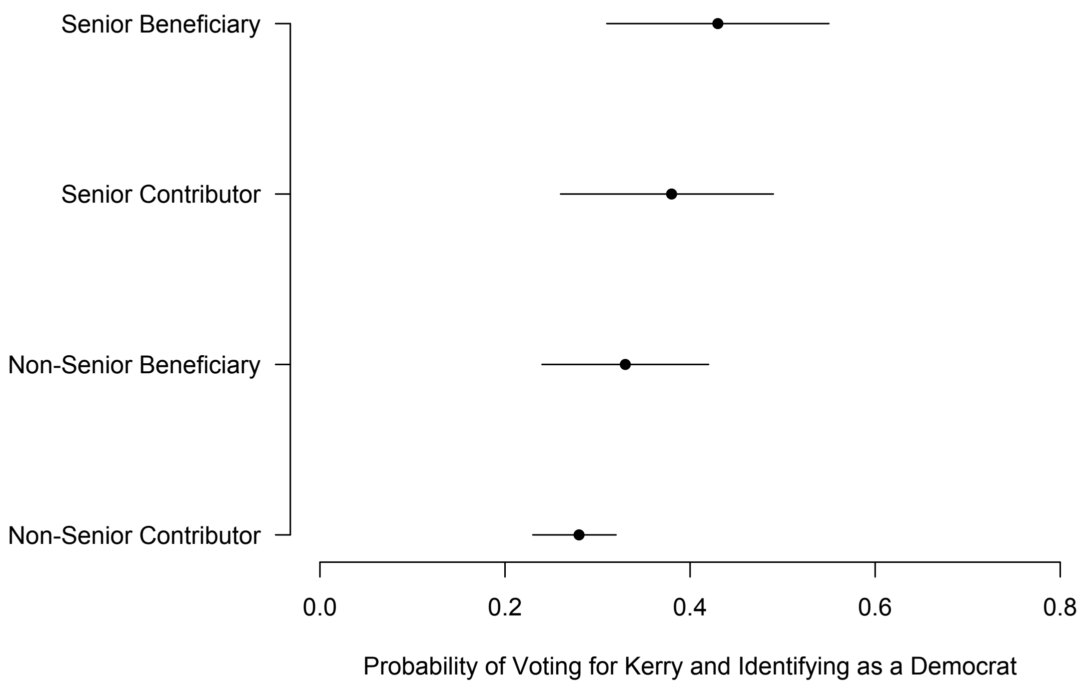

Figure 2: The Effect of Voter Age and Government Spending Benefit on the Probability of Voting Democratic and Identifying as a Democrat in the 2008 Presidential Election

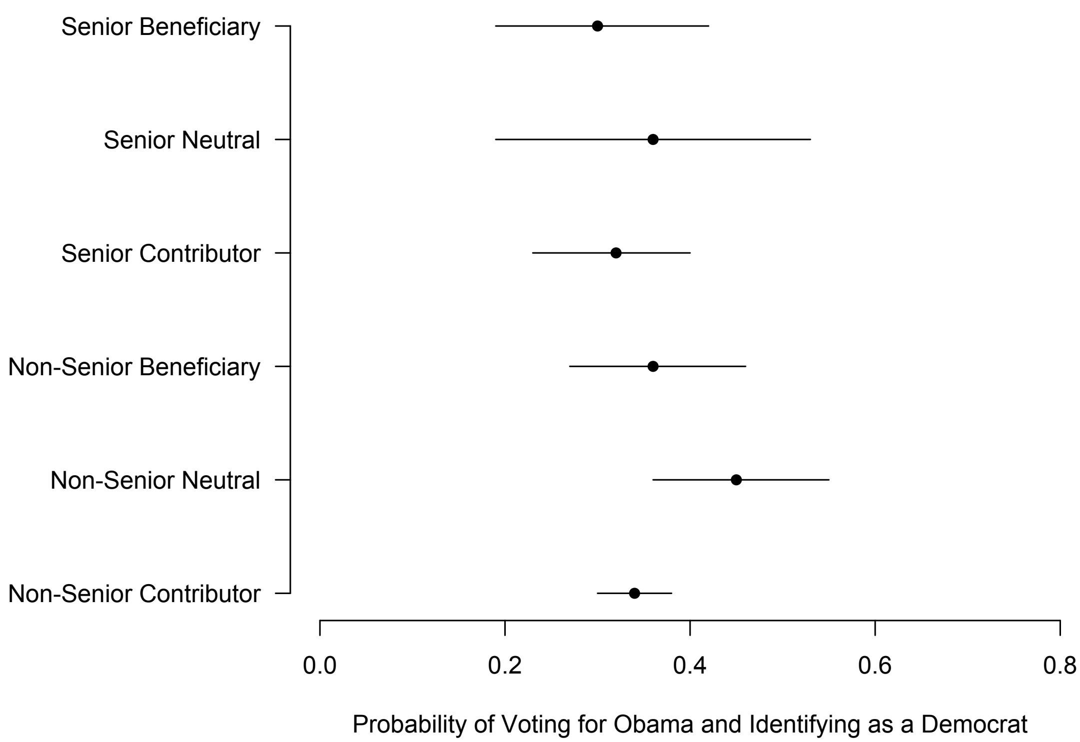

Figure 3: The Effect of Voter Age and Government Spending Benefit on the Probability of Voting Democratic and Identifying as a Democrat in the 2012 Presidential Election