

Far from being mere ‘servants of Congress’, pre-20th century presidents were able to use federal resources to their partisan advantage

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Often characterized as impotent and servile to their parties, early American presidents have been thought to have been insignificant to policy outcomes. As [Jon C. Rogowski's](#) work on presidential influence over the Post Office Department uncovers, however, 19th-century presidents were able to make a noticeable difference to the national distribution of federal resources, to the advantage of their fellow party politicians. His findings require a reassessment of the relative power of early presidents, and suggest their impotence has been significantly overstated.



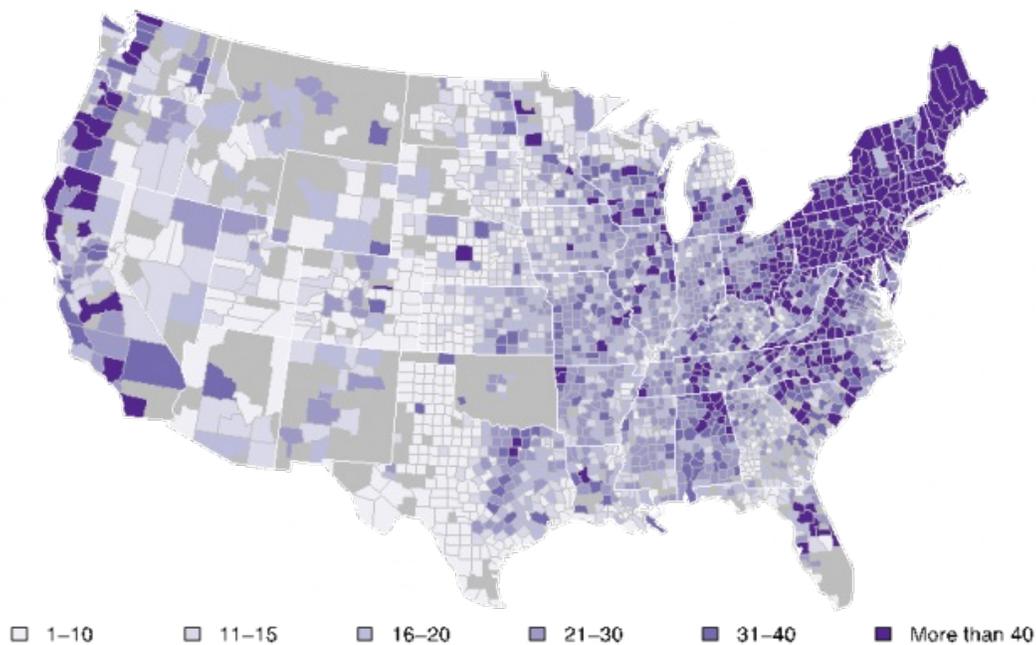
To what degree do US presidents affect policy outcomes? Observers of the contemporary American political system document the increased power accumulated by the presidency, disagreeing only about whether this development has [pushed the US to the brink of constitutional crisis](#) or is [cause for celebration](#). During the “modern” presidency – as scholarship often calls the current period– presidents have enjoyed substantive advantages in bargaining with Congress due to their position as head of an expansive federal bureaucracy and direct connection to the public. Modern presidents have also made considerably greater use of unilateral tools relative to their predecessors.

[President-centered government](#), however, contrasts with the Founders’ vision for the American republic, in which Madison argued “[the legislative branch necessarily predominates](#).” The title of Woodrow Wilson’s doctoral dissertation, *Congressional Government*, summarized the conventional wisdom about the locus of the political power in nineteenth-century America. With a few notable exceptions, most nineteenth-century presidents were among the [most forgettable](#) and the [most forgotten](#). Lacking both the institutional advantages and the public profiles of presidents serving during the modern era, earlier presidents are believed to have been the servants of Congress and their parties and are mostly relegated to the dustbins of history.

Focusing on the late nineteenth century, I argue that the currently accepted explanations of the development of the American presidency overlook important institutional advantages held by presidents prior to the modern era. In particular, appointment prerogatives and the accumulation of expertise by executive branch departments produced informational asymmetries that were likely to be in the president’s favor.

In new research, I study presidential influence during the late nineteenth century using an original data set on the distribution of federal post offices in US counties from 1876 to 1896. During this period, the post office was the most visible imprint of the national government in local communities. The Post Office Department was the largest source of federal employment during this period and constituted 18 percent of the national domestic budget by the 1890s. Debates over post office siting and appointments animated frequent political battles (and consumed considerable time and attention) within Congress and across the branches of government. Over this twenty-year period, the number of post offices nationwide nearly doubled, from around 35,000 to about 69,000. As Figure 1 shows, however, post offices were not evenly distributed; instead, their distribution varied both across regions and within states.

Figure 1 – Distribution of Post Offices in US Counties, 1896

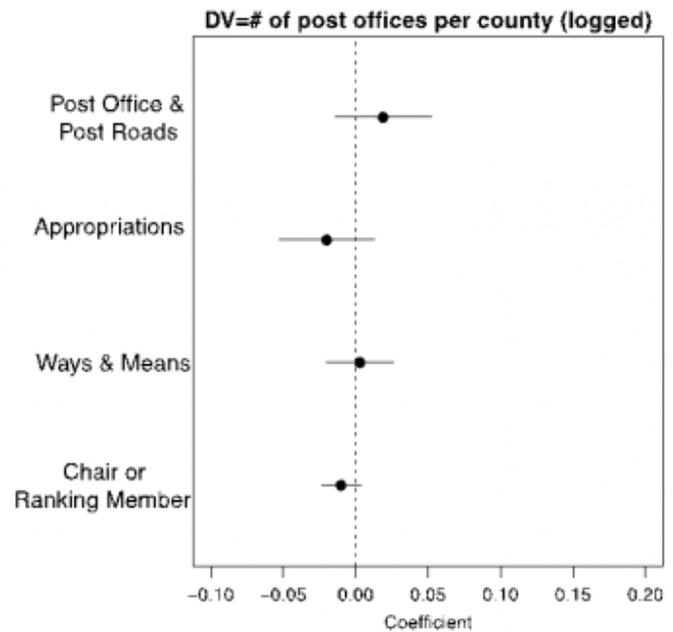
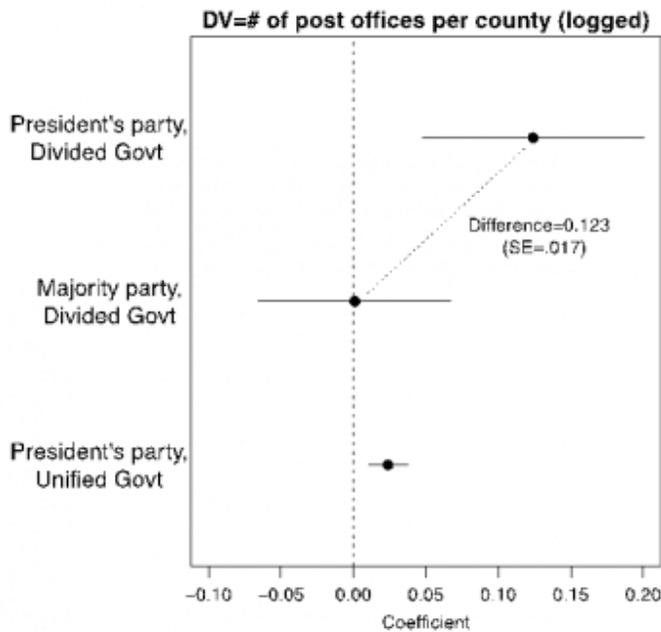


Following recent empirical research on distributive politics, I model the county-level distribution of post offices (logged) with a county and year fixed-effects framework. The key independent variables are indicators for whether a county’s House representative is a member of the *President’s party*. As *de facto* party leaders, presidents had incentives to direct federal resources to constituencies represented by their copartisans (politicians belonging to the same party). I also account for the presence of unified and divided government. If presidents are more influential than Congress in determining the allocation of post offices, I expect the coefficient for *President’s party* to be larger in magnitude than the indicator for *Majority party* under divided government.

Figure 2 shows my main results. The plotted points represent the estimated coefficients and the horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals. The results on the left provide unambiguous evidence of presidential influence even during this period of congressional dominance. Under divided government, a county represented by a presidential copartisan in the House received roughly 12 percent more post offices than a county that was represented by a member of the majority party. Under unified government, a county represented by the president’s party received about 3 percent more post offices relative to a county represented by the minority party in Congress. Both of these differences are statistically significant. The larger effects under divided government suggest presidential strategies to benefit copartisan politicians, in which post offices accumulated at greater rates as the number of copartisans declined.

The plot on the right shows the coefficients for other factors posited by existing scholarship as important predictors of distributive outcomes. While I find some evidence that members on the Post Office and Post Roads committee received greater numbers of post offices, for instance, the coefficient is statistically distinguishable from zero and small in magnitude. All of the other coefficients for committee membership or leadership (such as whether or not the committee member has seniority in the committee) are virtually zero or negative.

Figure 2 – Coefficient Estimates



My findings are robust when tested against other methods of analysis; they are also found when studying state-level patterns of post office distribution and the partisan composition of a state's Senate delegation. These latter results provide an especially important robustness check because Senators, chosen by state legislatures, would have had incentives to secure post offices to provide the state party with patronage opportunities. The results therefore suggest that influence over federal resources like post offices allowed nineteenth-century presidents to play important roles in constructing party networks.

These findings demand a rethink of conventional understandings of the president's role in nineteenth-century governance. While the Great Depression and two world wars indeed provided presidents with important opportunities to transform the office of the presidency, earlier presidents were not entirely without their own institutional advantages. The rise of the modern presidency may have been less a "big bang" than a gradual shift in institutional powers. The findings also highlight the importance of presidential politics for contributing to patterns of state-building, as the president's political incentives had important implications for the geographic expansion of the American state.

This article is based on the paper, 'Presidential Influence in an Era of Congressional Dominance' in American Political Science Review.

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