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MOOCHERS AND MAKERS IN THE VOTING BOOTH
WHO BENEFITS FROM FEDERAL SPENDING AND HOW DID THEY VOTE IN THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?

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Abstract The 2012 election campaign popularized the notion that people who benefit from federal spending vote for Democrats, while people who pay the preponderance of taxes vote Republican. A survey conducted during the election included questions to test this hypothesis and to assess the accuracy of voters' perceptions of federal spending. Voters' perceptions of their benefit from federal spending are determined by family income, age, employment status, and number of children, as well as by party identification and race. Voters aged 65 and older who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending are more likely to be Democrats and vote for Barack Obama than seniors who believe they are net contributors to the federal government. However, the 77.5 percent of voters under age 65 who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending are as likely to vote for Romney as for Obama and as likely to be Republicans as Democrats. Voters who live in states that receive more in federal funds than they pay in federal taxes are less likely to vote for Obama or to be Democrats. For most of the electorate, dependence on federal spending is unrelated to vote choice.

Harold Lasswell (1936) defined politics as "who gets what, when, and how." To voters, it is the federal budget—the combination of taxes paid and benefits received—that defines who gets what. The conflict over who gets what in the federal budget captured attention in the 2012 election campaign after the release of a videotape in which Republican candidate Mitt Romney told a group of supporters, "There are 47 percent who are with [President Obama],

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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." This quote haunted Romney during the campaign, yet he reaffirmed it after the election when he told a group of donors that Obama won because he "focused on giving targeted groups a big gift...that add up to trillions of dollars" (Reston 2012).

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 in taxes than they receive in federal benefits—the makers—while the Democratic party represents people who receive more in government benefits than they pay in taxes—the moochers (e.g., Eberstadt 2012; Sykes 2012). Campaign rhetoric aside, perceptions of the federal budget constitute an important test case for economic theories of voting. Theoretically, voters who benefit from federal spending should 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.

The public's perceptions of who gets what from federal spending is understudied, as is the effect of such perceptions on vote choice. A 2012 election survey included a question asking people whether their family is a net beneficiary of or net contributor to the federal budget. This article assesses the content of those perceptions—they do seem to be partly accurate—and then uses them to explain vote choice in the 2012 presidential election. Surprisingly, there is little correlation between voters' perceptions of whether they benefit from federal spending and their vote. 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 one briefly reviews the literature on federal spending and elections. Section two describes the 2012 election survey instruments and assesses their validity. Section three presents results from a model of vote choice and party identification that includes public perceptions of benefit from federal spending. Section four discusses implications for party competition, budget politics, and theories of voter behavior.

What We Know About Federal Spending and Voter Choice

Aggregate-level evidence suggests that federal spending affects elections. Kriner and Reeves (2012) examine county-level data from 1980 through 2008 and find that increases in federal grant spending are associated with increases in the incumbent presidential party's share of the vote. They conclude that "presidents are rewarded at the ballot box for federal spending" (Kriner and Reeves 2012, 363).

A few studies examine the relationship between presidential elections and a state's net benefit from federal spending, taking into account both taxes paid and spending received. Lacy (2002) shows that states that received more in federal spending than their residents paid in taxes were more likely to vote for Republican George W. Bush than for Democrat Al Gore in 2000 (see also Pink [2004]). States that increased their ratio of federal spending to tax dollars during the Clinton administration were even more likely to vote for Bush. Francia and Levine (2006) show that states that increased their vote share for Bush from 2000 to 2004 saw increased federal spending per tax dollar over the same period. Lacy (2013) shows that a state's ratio of federal spending to taxes has an increasingly positive correlation with Republican vote margin since 1996. In contrast to the findings of Kriner and Reeves (2012), only Republican presidential candidates, not incumbents generally, benefit from increases in federal spending (Lacy 2013). Kriner and Reeves (2012), Francia and Levine (2006), and Lacy (2002, 2013) examine aggregate data, not the individual-level relationship between benefit from federal spending and vote choice.

Several studies show that individuals may not be aware of the benefits they receive in the federal budget. Howard (1999) argues that the tax code creates a hidden welfare state through tax breaks and loopholes such as the home mortgage interest deduction, college loan interest deductions, and employer pensions. Mettler (2011, 38) finds in survey data that about 50 to 60 percent of Americans who benefit from tax loopholes report that they "have not used a government social program." Similarly, about one-quarter of people who receive food stamps or subsidized housing and over 40 percent of people who receive Medicare or Social Security claim that they "have not used a government social program." Many Americans appear unaware that they benefit from federal spending (Appelbaum and Gebeloff 2012).

These findings raise at least two questions that need answers. First, are people's perceptions of their net benefit from federal spending accurate or, at the minimum, do their perceptions coincide with the variables that determine who gets what from the federal government? We do not know whether the people who believe they benefit from federal spending are the ones who do. Theoretically, people's net benefit from federal spending should matter to them, not whether they benefit from specific social programs. Presumably most people who receive Social Security, Medicare, or government salaries do not pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits, but some might. People who benefit from tax loopholes may still pay a lot more in federal taxes than they receive in federal dollars. It is the balance of taxes paid and spending received that should in theory create political divisions among voters.

Second, what is the impact of perceptions of federal spending on the vote? Mitt Romney's comment that the 47 percent of Americans who are dependent on the government would vote for Obama is consistent with a conventional perception that people who benefit from federal spending vote Democratic. This is not only mere campaign rhetoric. It is consistent with self-interest if beneficiaries of federal spending vote for the party that will protect federal coffers while net contributors to those same coffers vote for the party that promises to cut taxes and spending. No academic study examines whether people who benefit from federal spending are more likely to vote for one political party over the other.

Measuring Perceptions of Benefit from Federal Spending

Data for this study come from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (hereafter CCES). The CCES is an opt-in survey conducted over the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix.[1] The computer format of the CCES 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). The study solicited 77,357 email addresses, of which 29,182 yielded a completed interview and 3,267 a partial interview. The sample is weighted to match the 2008 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The questions used in this study were part of a two-wave panel given to a randomly selected 1,000 respondents in the CCES sample. Wave 1 was fielded between October 1 and November 3, 2012, $N = 1{,}000$. All respondents to wave 1 were invited to participate in wave 2. Wave 2 was conducted between November 7, 2012, and January 6, 2013, with 96 percent of interviews completed before December 1, 2012, $N = 822$. The survey methodology, questions, and descriptive statistics are in the appendix.

To measure public perceptions of benefit from federal spending, wave 1 included the following question:

> "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?"
>
> ( ) Pay more in taxes than we get back from the federal government

1. The CCES is a nonprobability sample. Therefore, no accepted AAPOR response rate can be calculated and reported for the survey. See Ansolabehere and Schaffner (2012) and http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces for details on the CCES survey.

( ) Get back from the federal government more than we pay in taxes
( ) Pay about the same amount in taxes as we get back from the government

Such a question could present a family's benefit from federal spending in retrospective, prospective, or current terms. A retrospective approach would 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 CCES survey question taps current benefit: "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 a prospective version of the 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.

Of the 986 respondents who answered the question in the October preelection survey, 56.5 percent of respondents believe they pay more in taxes than their family receives in spending, making them net contributors to federal coffers. Another 24.8 percent believe they pay about the same in taxes as they receive in spending. Only 18.7 percent believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending since they receive more from the federal government than they pay in taxes.[2]

The fact that less than 20 percent of Americans believe their families receive more in federal spending than they pay in taxes says much about the federal budget. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's remark that 47 percent of Americans are dependent on the government is based on the percentage of Americans who do not pay income tax. But most of those Americans do pay Social Security, Medicare, and excise taxes. Even if 47 percent of the public does not pay income taxes, a much smaller share perceive of themselves as net beneficiaries of federal spending.

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 do not know how much each individual really receives 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,

2. These percentages are based on the weighted YouGov/Polimetrix sample. Descriptive statistics for the variables in the analysis are included in the appendix.

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. The dependent variable in this ordered logit model has three values: a respondent believes her family (1) 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.

The explanatory variables are socioeconomic factors that determine eligibility for some of the larger federal spending programs, plus political variables that are known to filter 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 served or have immediate family members who served in the military are likely to benefit from federal spending. A three-category dummy variable separates respondents into those who served in the military, those who have family members who served, and 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, and whites tend to associate welfare programs with African Americans (Gilens 1999).

A voter's party identification may also explain their perceived benefit from federal spending. One reason for this link may be self-interest. Democrats may be more likely to know about or to seek federal benefits, while Republicans may be more likely to forego federal benefits. Partisans may also rationalize whether they benefit from federal programs. Democrats may be more likely than Republicans to claim a personal benefit from federal spending, in support of the party's reputation for protecting federal programs. Republicans may be more likely to deny that they benefit from federal spending when they really do. Alternatively, when partisans mimic the rhetoric of their party's leaders, Republicans may claim that they are net contributors to the government while Democrats may express they are net beneficiaries.

An additional variable may explain people's perceptions of their benefit from federal spending: their home state's actual benefit from federal spending. Information about total federal taxes paid from each state in each year is available from the Internal Revenue Service.[3] Total federal spending in each state is reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in the Consolidated Federal Funds Report (2011). A state's benefit from federal spending is measured as total spending in a state divided by total taxes paid from the state, ranging from a low of \$0.53 for Delaware to a high of \$3.67 for New Mexico. The median states, Tennessee and North Carolina, receive \$1.55 and \$1.58 in federal spending for every dollar paid in taxes.[4]

Table 1 reports the results of the ordered logit model.[5] People's perceptions of their family benefit from federal spending vary systematically with the sociodemographic and political variables that should predict them. 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. The square of age has a positive coefficient, indicating a nonlinear effect where older Americans begin to receive more in federal spending than they pay in taxes.[6] The number of children under 18 in a family is positively related to perceived benefit from federal spending. Military service—by either the respondent or a family member—is unrelated to perceived benefit from federal spending. Gender and marital status have no effect on perceptions of federal spending benefit.

A state's federal spending ratio is unrelated to a voter's perceived family benefit from federal spending. When estimating that benefit, people do not account for the indirect effect of federal spending near their homes: military bases, national parks, federal roads and public works projects, grants, and more. 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."

3. 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.

4. 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).

5. Models are estimated on five multiply imputed data sets because of missing observations on family income. Estimates are averages of the estimates from the five data sets, with standard errors adjusted (King et al. 2001).

6. 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 for seniors.

Table 1. Determinants of Self-Reported Net Benefit from Federal Spending

Independent variables	*Coefficient (robust standard errors)*
State taxes:spending ratio	.08
	(.12)
White	–.37*
	(.15)
Female	–.05
	(.14)
Age	–.10*
	(.03)
Age squared	.001*
	(.0003)
Currently married	–.07
	(.15)
Family income (1–16 scale)	–.07*
	(.03)
Full-time job	–.39*
	(.17)
Education level (1–6 scale)	–.05
	(.05)
Number of children under 18	.19*
	(.08)
Respondent military service	–.34
	(.25)
Family member military service	–.31
	(.24)
Democrat	.53*
	(.16)
Republican	–.26
	(.18)
Cut point 1	–2.84*
	(.66)
Cut point 2	–1.48*
	(.66)
Wald Chi-square	95.5*

Source.—2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, YouGov/Polimetrix. Entries are ordered logit estimates. *$p < .05$, two-tailed. $N = 930$.

The "subjective" measures of benefit from federal spending—party identification and race—also show expected effects. White voters are less likely than others to believe that they benefit from federal spending, consistent with the implications of Gilens's (1999) study. Party identification has both expected and unexpected effects. The traditional seven-point party identification scale

(Strong Democrat to Strong Republican, not presented in this analysis) is negatively associated with benefit from federal spending. Recasting party identification as dummy variables for Democrats and Republicans, compared to the baseline Independents, reveals a nonlinear effect of party identification. Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans or Independents to believe that they receive more in spending than they pay in taxes. But Republicans do not differ significantly from Independents in their perception of net benefit from federal spending.

Two results stand out in the models. First, people's perceptions of federal spending partly reflect the real world. Respondents who probably should believe they benefit from federal spending do, including those with lower income, those not employed full-time, seniors, and parents of several children. If the effects 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 changes, then what is the intercept or threshold at which voters believe they are no longer contributors to the federal government but rather beneficiaries? This intercept may be lower in voters' perceptions than it is in reality. To borrow Mettler's (2011) description, it may be submerged, with many voters benefitting from federal spending before their benefit reaches a perceptible level.

Second, people's perceptions are skewed. The reflection of the real world is partly influenced by the perceptual filters of race and party identification. Democrats are more likely than Republicans or Independents to believe they benefit from federal spending, perhaps capturing reality, rationalizations, or partisan rhetoric. The effect of race is significant and ever present. White voters are more likely than others to believe that their families are net contributors to the federal budget.

Perceptions of Federal Spending Benefit and the 2012 Presidential Vote

Did voters' perceptions of their dependence on federal spending influence their vote in the 2012 presidential election? Conventional wisdom, reflected in Mitt Romney's comment 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. The questions about perceptions of benefit from federal spending that appeared on the 2012 CCES 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 "budget neutrals," or people who believe that the spending they receive equals the taxes they pay. The 2012 two-party popular vote was 52.0 percent for Obama and 48.0 percent for Romney. The CCES weighted post-election sample of people who voted for one of the two major-party candidates and answered the question about their benefit from federal spending in the preelection survey shows a two-party vote of 52.0 percent for Obama and 48.0 percent for Romney ($N = 642$). Table 2 shows the two-party vote by a respondent's self-reported benefit from federal spending.

Among the 18.3 percent of voters who believe they benefit from federal spending, 54.7 percent voted for Obama. Moochers did indeed cast their votes more for Obama than for Romney, but not by much. Moochers are defined here as voters who profess to receive more in federal benefits than they pay in taxes. This self-identified group presents 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, given the stigma attached to dependence by Republicans during the 2012 campaign. Of the 58 percent of the sample who believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in spending, Romney won by a margin of 52 percent to Obama's 48 percent.

The 23.7 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. Voters who believe they are budget neutral were the most Democratic-leaning in the electorate. This group poses two problems for subsequent analysis. First, the effect of perceived spending benefit on vote choice is nonlinear. Therefore, 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 Mitt Romney have fared better in the election if government spending were much lower and far fewer people received federal benefits? The tempting response is that Romney would have reaped 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 would move to the budget-neutral category of federal benefit, not the net contributors category.

Table 2. 2012 Presidential Vote of Moochers and Makers

Presidential vote	*Net beneficiary*	*Budget neutral*	*Net contributor*	*Percentage of sample*
Mitt Romney	45.3%	40.4%	51.9%	48.0%
Barack Obama	54.7	59.6	48.1	52.0
Percentage of sample	18.3	23.7	58.0	100.0

Source.—2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, YouGov/Polimetrix. $N = 642$.

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. A reduction in federal spending and taxes could help Democratic presidential candidates and hurt Republicans.

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 so 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-aged people on welfare. Taking seniors out of consideration and focusing only on the 77.5 percent of the voting sample under age 65 further complicates the relationship between vote choice and dependence on government. Among nonseniors who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending, 53.0 percent voted for Obama. But among nonseniors who believe they are net contributors, 51.6 percent voted for Obama. The difference in vote choice between the two groups is not statistically significant ($p = .29$). Put another way, 47 percent of people who are dependent on government and not of age to receive Social Security or Medicare voted for Romney. Nonseniors who believe they are neither net contributors nor net beneficiaries voted for Obama by a 69 percent to 31 percent margin.

The relationship between dependence on government and vote choice is very different for seniors than for nonseniors, and closer to the moocher hypothesis. Seniors are much like nonseniors in their beliefs about their benefit from government: 58.0 percent believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in spending, 18.3 percent believe they receive more in spending, and 23.7 percent believe their taxes paid equal benefits received. However, only 40 percent of seniors voted for Obama, compared to 55.5 percent of nonseniors. Seniors who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending gave Obama 58 percent of their votes. Seniors whose taxes paid equal benefits received gave Obama 61.9 percent of their votes. In stark contrast to nonseniors, seniors who believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits voted for Romney by a 70.6 to 29.4 percent margin.

A multivariate model provides a more detailed assessment of the relationship between vote choice and federal spending in both its individual and aggregate forms. 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 nonseniors 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 nonseniors.

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 2010 captures a voter's indirect benefit from federal spending.

Party identification and perceived spending benefit are related, as table 1 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 postelection survey). Each equation contains a voter's self-reported federal spending benefit and race (white versus nonwhite) as well as the state spending ratio.

Results from the model appear in table 3. The coefficients for the interaction of age and spending benefit are compared to the baseline category of

Table 3. Bivariate Probit Model of Vote Choice and Party Identification in 2012 Presidential Election

Independent variables	*Vote for Obama*	*Democrat*
Nonsenior budget neutral	.49*	.38*
	(.15)	(.15)
Nonsenior beneficiary	.10	.13
	(.16)	(.16)
Senior contributor	–.49*	–.28
	(.17)	(.17)
Senior budget neutral	–.10	–.20
	(.18)	(.20)
Senior 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. *$p < .05$, two-tailed. $N = 642$.

nonseniors who believe they are net contributors. The key finding from the model is that in both the vote choice and party identification equations, the coefficients for nonsenior net beneficiary are not statistically significant. Among the 77.5 percent of voters who are under the age of 65, people who believe they are net beneficiaries are no more likely to be Democrats or vote for Barack Obama than the people who believe they pay more in taxes than they receive in spending.

The effect of federal spending benefit on vote choice and party is different for seniors than for nonseniors. Figure 1 shows the conditional effects of federal spending benefit depending on age, based on the results in table 3. The horizontal lines in the graph show the 95 percent credibility interval for the effect of each age and benefit combination on the joint probability that a voter is a Democrat and votes for Obama. Among seniors, net beneficiaries are more likely than net contributors to be Democrats and to vote for Obama. The probability of voting for Obama and identifying as a Democrat is .45, .29, and .23 for senior beneficiaries, senior budget neutrals, and senior contributors, respectively. For nonseniors, the effect of federal spending benefit on vote choice and party identification is nonlinear. Nonsenior beneficiaries and contributors are not significantly different from each other in their probability of voting for Obama and being Democrats (.40 for beneficiaries, .35 for contributors). Nonsenior budget neutrals have a .51 probability—the highest of any group—of voting for Obama and identifying as Democrats. The most pro-Obama voters are nonsenior budget neutrals and senior beneficiaries. The

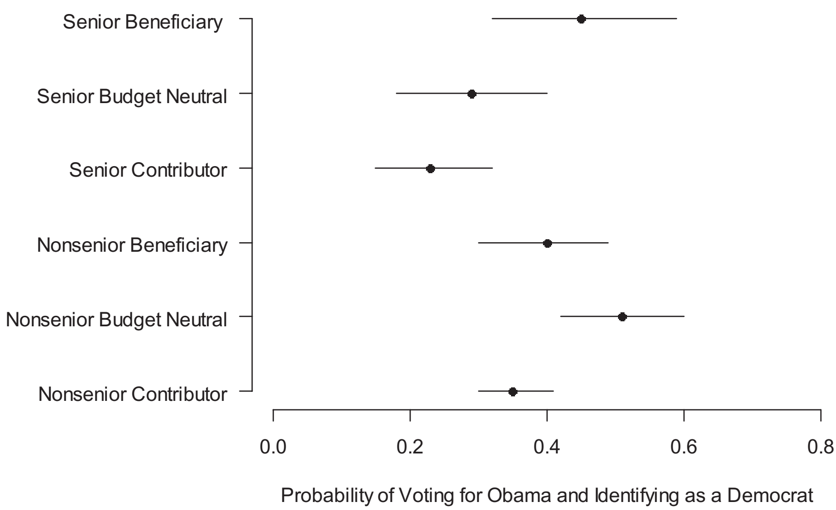

Figure 1. The Effects of Federal Benefits on Vote Choice and Party Identification Depend on a Voter's Age.

group least likely to support Obama or identify as Democrats are seniors who believe they lose money to the government.

Several explanations are possible for the difference between seniors and nonseniors. 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 44.5 percent of nonseniors. 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 nonsenior 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 perceive government programs as irrelevant to them but believe taxes are too high. Alternatively, some seniors may not view Social Security and Medicare as government benefits so much as recouping a lifetime of taxes paid.

The 77.5 percent of voters under the age of 65 pose the critical test for the hypothesis that moochers vote Democratic and makers vote Republican. The stereotype of someone who is dependent on government is not a senior citizen on Social Security, but a nonsenior on welfare. Yet benefiting from government spending has no effect on the probability of voting for Obama among voters under the age of 65. Figure 1 shows that nonsenior beneficiaries have about a .40 probability of being Democrats and voting for Obama, compared to a .35 probability for nonsenior contributors. This difference is not statistically significant.

The ratio of federal spending received to tax dollars paid by a voter's state of residence is an additional measure of spending benefit. Voters who live in states that are net beneficiaries of federal spending are more likely to vote for Mitt Romney, 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). Voters who live in states that benefit from federal spending 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. A one-dollar increase in federal spending per tax dollar—moving from Ohio's ratio of 1.0 to North Dakota's ratio of 2.0—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 benefit from federal spending 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.

Another way to disentangle voters' beliefs about federal spending from their partisanship is to estimate the conditional effect of federal spending benefit on the vote of each partisan group. A probit model of vote choice that includes an interaction of party identification (Republican, Democrat, and Independent as separate categories) and federal spending benefit isolates the conditional effect of federal spending benefit for each type of partisan voter. Federal spending benefit does not affect the vote choice of any partisan group. Within each partisan group, net beneficiaries are not statistically different from net contributors in their probability of voting for Obama. The effect of spending benefit for Independents is particularly instructive, since Independents are presumably free of the distorting effects of partisanship on their perceptions of federal spending. For voters who believe they benefit from federal spending, the predicted probability of an Obama vote is .86 among Democrats, .48 among Independents, and .03 among Republicans. The predicted probability of an Obama vote for Independents who believe they benefit from federal spending is .48, compared to .43 among Independents who believe they lose money to the federal government. The .05 difference between the two groups of Independents is not statistically significant (95 percent credibility interval of difference is –.15 to .26). Independents who believe they are budget neutral are more likely to vote for Obama than either the net beneficiaries or the net contributors (.58 predicted probability of an Obama vote), but the differences between them and net beneficiaries or net contributors is not statistically significant. Dependence on government spending does not pull Independents toward Obama.

The multivariate models point to the same conclusion: Moochers and makers are no different from each other in the voting booth. Nonseniors who believe they are net beneficiaries of federal spending were just about as likely to vote for Mitt Romney as for Barack Obama in 2012. While moochers were slightly more likely to vote for Obama, 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. However, voters of retirement age do show a pattern of partisan support consistent with the moocher hypothesis. Seniors who believe they are net beneficiaries of government spending vote Democratic, while seniors who believe they are net contributors vote Republican. Was Mitt Romney's assertion correct about President Obama's support among the 47 percent of Americans who are dependent on government? Partially. It is correct for the 22.5 percent of voters who are 65 and older, but incorrect for the remaining 77.5 percent of the electorate.

Implications

The first question posed in this article is: Do people's perceptions of their 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—or intercept—at which a person shifts from a net contributor to a net beneficiary of federal spending may be underestimated by many people.

Party identification and race influence perceptions of benefit from federal spending. Neither variable determines actual taxes paid or money received from the federal government. There is no tax break or spending program for which race or party identification is a qualification. There is little reason to expect that party identification and race would have an impact on perceptions of benefit after controlling for income, age, education, and job status. Yet, like much else in American politics, perceptions of federal spending are filtered through lenses of partisanship and race. Further research should determine if these effects are simply time bound, with minorities believing they benefit from federal spending while Obama is president and Republicans believing they lose money to the federal government when a Democrat is president.

The second question posed in this paper is: 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? Net beneficiaries and net contributors did vote differently in the 2012 presidential election, but this difference was small. In multivariate models controlling for either age or party identification, the difference between moochers and makers disappears for most voters. For the less than one-quarter of American voters age 65 and over, a partisan divide does appear between net contributors and net beneficiaries. But for the remaining 77.5 percent of voters, the only appreciable effect of federal spending on vote choice in 2012 was that voters who believe they pay about the same in taxes as they receive in spending are more likely to vote Democratic than either net beneficiaries or net contributors. Among nonseniors, moochers are not different from makers in the voting booth. 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. The perception of moochers voting Democratic and makers voting Republican is at most a quarter-truth.

Voters are not clearly self-interested, if self-interest is defined as choosing the candidate who is most likely to protect what the voter reaps from the federal government. Seniors, having made their way in life to the point where the balance of federal taxes and benefits is critical, show a voting pattern that is consistent with self-interest. Senior net beneficiaries vote to protect government programs; senior net contributors no longer feel the need. But younger net beneficiaries do not lean Democratic, and net contributors do not lean Republican.

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 nondiscretionary. The president cannot change them, nor can Congress without a change in the law governing those benefits. Smaller programs, such as grants and procurements, can be influenced by the president (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 2013). Congressional Republicans sponsor as many earmarks for their states as do 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 those 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 Kieweit 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 themselves. Makers may believe that preserving spending programs is in the national interest even if it costs them at tax time.

The findings in this article have implications for the political parties and the federal budget. Federal spending does not cleanly divide Democrats and Republicans. 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 that 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? Much of the electorate faces a 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.

Appendix. Survey Description and Summary Statistics

The 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study is an opt-in survey conducted over the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix. The sample was matched to the 2008 American Community Survey based on age, race, gender, education, marital status, number of children under 18, family income, employment status, citizenship, state, and metropolitan area. Data on reported 2008 voter registration and turnout from the November 2008 Current Population Survey were matched using a weighted Euclidean distance metric. Data on religion, church attendance, born-again or evangelical status, news interest, party identification, and ideology were matched from the 2007 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. The target sample was selected by stratification by age, race, gender, and education, and by simple random sampling within strata.

The samples drawn for the CCES were chosen from the YouGov/Polimetrix PollingPoint Panel and the E-Rewards and Western Wats panels using a five-way cross-classification (age x gender x race x education x state). All respondents who completed the preelection survey in October 2012 were reinvited to the postelection survey in November. The final set of completed preelection interviews was then matched to the target population, using a weighted Euclidean distances metric.

The panel component of the study solicited 77,357 email addresses, of which 29,182 yielded a completed interview and 3,267 a partial interview. Of these, 1,000 respondents were selected to participate in the component of the CCES reported here.

Wave 1 of this component of the CCES survey was fielded between October 1 and November 3, 2012, $N = 1{,}000$. Wave 2 was conducted between November 7, 2012, and January 6, 2013, with 96 percent of interviews completed before December 1, 2012, $N = 822$.

The federal spending questions appeared in wave 1 of the survey, along with a presidential preference question, party identification questions, and all of the demographic questions in the survey. The postelection party identification and vote choice questions were taken from Wave 2 of the survey.

The preelection vote intention question shows a significant bias toward Obama compared to the actual popular vote. Most of this bias disappears in the postelection vote choice question due to a combination of panel attrition ($N = 178$) and wave 2 interviewees who did not vote. Among respondents with a recorded wave 1 presidential candidate preference who did not complete the wave 2 vote choice question, 75 percent preferred Barack Obama. Completing panel surveys is correlated with a tendency to vote; thus, the wave 2 vote choice question more closely approximates the actual election outcome than the preelection vote intention. After dropping respondents who did not answer the federal spending question, the wave 2 vote choice matches the national popular vote, and all of the demographic variables are very close to the composition of the 2012 electorate as projected by Gallup. The wave 1 sample and wave 2 voters also do not differ significantly on responses to the federal spending question.

Summary statistics for the wave 1 survey sample and wave 2 voters appear below. The weighted survey sample matches the U.S. population on key demographic variables. The weighted sample of voters matches the two-party national popular vote.

Variable	Description	Survey sample	Voters
Presidential vote	Sample: Preelection preference	Obama: 58.5%	52.0%
	Voters: Postelection presidential vote	Romney: 41.5%	48.0%
Federal	Taxes paid more than benefits received	56.5%	58.0%
Spending	Taxes paid equal benefits received	24.8%	23.7%
benefit	Taxes paid less than benefits received	18.7%	18.3%
Party ID	"Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?"	Democrat 38.3% Republican 23.0%	43.4% 29.1%
White	Race of respondent	72.4%	82.0%
Female	Gender of respondent	51.9%	51.4%
Age	In years from 18 to 92	Average: 47 years Seniors: 18.4%	50 years 22.5%
Currently married	Does not include unmarried, divorced, widowed, or domestic partnerships	54.7%	58.8%
Education level	Did not graduate high school	9.3%	4.7%
	High school graduate	28.1%	26.4%
	Some college	25.6%	23.0%
	Two-year college degree	8.8%	9.1%
	Four-year college degree	18.5%	24.8%
	Postgraduate Work	9.7%	12.0%
Full-time job	Currently working full-time	35.7%	36.0%

Continued

Appendix. *Continued*

Variable	Description	Survey sample	Voters
Family income	16 response categories from under $10,000 to $500,000 or more	Mean = $40,000–$49,000	$40,000–$49,000
Number of children	No children under 18 years old	69.8%	71.7%
	One child	13.9%	13.5%
	Two	9.6%	9.6%
	Three	4.5%	4.2%
	Four	1.8%	1.7%
	Five or more	0.4%	0.3%
Military service	Respondent served or serving	10.2%	11.0%
	Family member served or serving	44.4%	49.6%
N	Demographics and party	931	642
	Vote intention or vote choice	896	642

Source.—2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, YouGov/Polimetrix.

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