Swing Voter Theory in American Presidential Elections∗

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Abstract

This paper evaluate the theory that U.S. presidents use their discretionary spending power to influence the presidential election outcomes in swing states. Previous empirical studies test this theory with aggregate level data and confirm that president’s do indeed try to give more pork to swing states than core ones. It has now become a given among scholars that presidents will try to sway swing stats with federal spending. However, I challenge this conventional wisdom that presidents act in this way by implementing two major changes to the research methodology. First, I change the type of spending used in the analysis to hone it down more specifically: grant and procurement spending instead of total spending in a state. Second, in addition to using a more traditional measure of the what a swing state is, as another measure of a state’s competitiveness I develop a metric of how close a state is to swinging the election if it were tied. My interpretation of the swing voter theory hypothesis is that per capita spending as a function of the level of competitiveness should be increasing regardless of whether the state is less Democratic or more. Thus, the function should peak at zero if the level of competitiveness is the vote margin for the incumbent party. I test this in a panel regression model using per capita grant and procurement spending for the years 1993 to 2009 to find whether states that were electorally more competitive received a higher level of this type of funding. For both of my measures of a swing states and for both types of spending, my results give little evidence to the conventional belief that presidents try use federal spending for per capita dollar amounts of grants and procurements to influence swing states. These results are robust for many different types of control variables.

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1 Introduction

Do presidents allocate federal funding to states that are electorally important to them? The president has enough resources at his disposal and when he has an enormous incentive to use every avenue he has to increase his party’s chance of reelection, why not use these resources strategically? That is is conventional wisdom of scholars in American politics for some time now. This is a question of rational political behavior which is definitely a testable hypothesis with the federal spending data that is made publicly available. Surprisingly, part of the problem is defining how the president can influence his electoral prospects.

Allocating the US federal budget is a complex process that involves three main players: the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Presidency. The two Chambers of Congress construct the legislation and then the president ultimately signs it into law. But the president is often much more involved than than the final signing of the budget legislation. He often constructs the agenda of the budget process and has persuasive power, especially in the chambers in which his party holds a majority, while its moving through the committees and subcommittee for debate and revision.\(^1\) Thus, since the presidency is the most important single office in the nation and since the president has extensive influence in the budget allocation process, the presidential incumbent party should, many argue, utilize national resources to help the reelection of the current president or the election of the new candidate. One theory predicts that the best way to achieve this goal is to solicit the interest of the states that they expect to be the most contested in the next presidential election, which is labeled the swing voter theory. It has been developed into a formal model and subsequently well known since Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) and Dixit and Londregan (1996). Although they both developed different models, the basic idea is that the party acts as a single agent maximizing its expected vote share across states by directing federal funding towards those

\(^1\)Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010) reenforce this assertion.
states which are most competitive in the next election. The political economic environment of these formal models usually construct politicians in general, but, in order to test this theory empirically, we must conceptualize the specific electoral seats that the party is targeting for vote buying: House of Representatives, Senate and President. Despite the large literature on swing voter theory in Congressional elections and to a lesser extent Senate elections, very little has been studied on Presidential elections and vote buying. However, those that do study it find that the president does influence federal spending in line with the swing voter theory–most notably Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2006) and Taylor (2008). However, as I will explain, all of these studies do not fully address what a swing state should be or use a measure of federal spending that could be an insufficient distributive tool of the presidential incumbent party for buying votes. Therefore, as one of the extensions of the literature, I will use a new measure of federal spending: federal grants. In this paper, I will test whether electorally competitive districts received more federal funding in per capita dollar amount of grants and procurements for the years 1993-2009.

This particular research question is of great importance because swing voter theory has become the conventional way of thinking about distributive politics at the national level. We want to know if political agents act in the rational way that political scientist hypothesize. Buying votes from swing states assumes that the incumbent presidential party is acting rationally as a unit. It also assumes that its main goal is to use federal spending resources in a way that maximizes its reelection potential in the presidency. Indeed, it is one of the few ways for a party to strategically place distributive spending in a way that maximizes the chances of victory. If the evidence shows that this is not the case and both of the assumptions are correct, then that means that the party may not be acting rationally (at least in presidential elections). Of course, either or both of these assumptions may be incorrect. Perhaps each member of Congress wants to maximize her own reelection potential and does not want to help the president that much. Regardless, finding that there is not a statistically significant
relationship in this theory is an interesting result in and of itself because swing voter theory has become such a foundation of political economy that anything that shows otherwise could change the way political scientists think about American presidential elections.

2 Previous Work

The idea of distributive politics is that spending can be targeted towards a specific locality while the cost are distributed throughout the country.\(^2\) This theory can be true for any type of distributive spending—whether grants or procurements—since each measure is always within one state but the federal budget is paid for by taxes collectively. Swing voter theory assumes that the party will act as a single player and maximize its expected probability of winning an election by using distributive policies to capture support from non-ideological voters.

The literature on American distributive politics are divided into studies on the House of Representatives, the Senate, the President and any combination of the previous three (usually some combination of House and Senate). The literature before overwhelmingly focuses on either the House, the Senate or both. And many focus on a very particular part of time or area of spending. The literature on swing voter theory in distributive federal spending of the U.S. is quite extensive, and I cannot give a full literature review here. I will attempt to cite those that have had the most influence on recent studies. Stein and Bickers (1995) and Bickers and Stein (1996) argue that more vulnerable congressional candidates ask for more pork spending from their party. They find that the party funds those congressional members who are most vulnerable to defeat (those who were elected by a narrow margin). Others countries have also been studied. For example, Leigh (2008) studies how national funds are distributed in Australia and does not find that more discretionary funding was

\(^2\)As per Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnson (1981)
Recent research supports the hypothesis that presidents direct federal funding toward more electorally vulnerable congressional districts. Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010) talk about how the president has influence over spending, but analyze the question of how much he helps congressmen of his party who are marginal in their reelection chances. Although they address the question of swing voter theory in presidential elections, their main question is about how the president influences federal spending through committees (ex-ante) and agencies (ex-post). Swing voter theory is just one of their ancillary questions. Their measure of whether a state is a swing state or not is an indicator variable which equals 1 if the representative’s previous election was less than 5%. So they are addressing the swing voter theory from the perspective of electing congressional representatives and not the president. They find that the president’s party gives more funding to electorally vulnerable members of congress; but, because of the crude measure of their closeness variable, more research is needed in this particular area. Nevertheless, their paper lends the credibility that the president does have influence over the budget process. According to Gordan (2011), the president can have his appointed bureaucrats steer spending in ways that will benefit congressmen of his party. He argues that president George W. Bush sought to spend procurements as to influence the election in vulnerable Republican congressional districts.

There is a small strand of research that analyzes whether or not the president influences federal spending to improve his own electoral prospects. According to swing voter theory for U.S. presidents, the president’s party should direct more resources towards electorally competitive states rather than safe ones in order to win their votes. Evidence for this has been found for media spending and visits to the states by the candidates themselves—see Shaw (1999) and Hill and McKee (2005). Thus, it seems logical that they should also use

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3 For a fuller literature review of the swing voter theory in non-U.S.-presidential elections, see Cox (2010).
4 I will not address this question in my paper because I am analyzing the presidential and not the congressional elections.
discretionary spending in a similar way. I should note that Kiewiet and McCubbins (1988) build a theoretical model in which the president does have some influence over restraining federal money towards certain agencies through the veto, but it does not give him much influence over increasing spending to agencies. However, given a particular budget within an agency, the president can have great influence over where that given money is spent in each state. Moreover, he can have a great deal of influence over particular appropriation decisions, including the formula for grants, given the great influence of his office. This may also include logrolling with congressmen who would not otherwise support his spending program.

Despite the large literature on swing voter theory in congressional elections, little research has been done in distributive politics in presidential elections. And those that have done so have several flaws in the research design. The earliest of these papers and most revolutionary study is Wright (1974) who studies the New Deal spending under Roosevelt. He finds that a large part of the spending can be explained by the Democratic party attempting to maximize its number of expected electoral votes. He finds that the Roosevelt administration gave more funding to electorally competitive districts. Although this is a very wonderful analysis of the New Deal spending, we cannot necessarily implicate this to our time because the political environment has changed so much since then. Moreover, this is a very narrow study of a particular time period and a very particular type of spending (work relief jobs). Next is Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2006), which test the theory that electorally competitive states receive more per capita total federal spending with a simple panel data regression model. The main problem in their paper is the use of the total level of federal spending for each state as their dependent variable, which also includes non-discretionary spending also. Because total spending is so large of a measure, it could drown out the effect of any particular spending—grants or procurements—that is targeted towards the swing states. Furthermore, their measure of a swing state is the average number of times that a particular state has “swung” the election over the past four presidential election cycles, without clearly defining
what swung means. There is no indication that it involves any type of marginal vote share for the incumbent president. The second most recent work on presidential influence over distributive politics is Taylor (2008), who posits that presidents will direct more money towards competitive states during his or her first term and reward the states that voted favorably for him or her in the second term. But he finds evidence for neither theory, and thus does not find any evidence for the swing voter theory. I will not test this particular hypothesis because I am studying the party as the central figure who is trying to win presidential elections. In particular, the party does not show partiality to a first rather than a second presidential term because it will always want its candidate to be elected to the presidential office regardless of whether he or she is an incumbent or challenger. However, he does improve on the analysis by focusing his attention on procurements rather than total federal outlays. But procurements alone may not tell all of the story of how distributive politics is used with federal money. So, in spite of the findings in all of these papers, more is needed with this area of study.

3 Empirical Model

In order to test the theory I laid out in the previous section, I will estimate if there is any relationship between discretionary spending and electoral competitiveness between states. First, I must define some of the ways in which the federal government can allocate funding to the states in order to explain which type of spending I am using for my dependent variables and why I am using them. I make the point that it must be the case that we are measuring the truly discretionary part of spending.
3.1 Dependant Variable

In order to properly evaluate the swing voter hypothesis, I must address the U.S. federal spending category that is relevant to presidential influence. Some federal spending allow changes regularly year by year and are allocated by politicians and others are not (such as those based on entitlement). In particular, grants are federal dollars given through legislation attempting to accomplish a specific purpose. For example, this might include funding for neighborhood improvement (the community development grants) that goes towards rebuilding houses in a poverty stricken neighborhood. These are allocated by a formula for each particular grant, which are considered to be highly subjective to influence by political actors because they can be targeted in legislation towards something that is particular to that state.

Although the federal government has many ways to spend money in local areas, I will focus on two main types of spending because of their previous use in the literature. Using definitions from U.S. Census Bureau (2009), the two spending categories that will be dependent variables are

1. Grants: these are federal dollars given through legislation attempting to accomplish a specific purpose. For example, this might include funding for neighborhood improvement (the community development grants) that goes towards rebuilding houses in a poverty stricken neighborhood. These are allocated by a formula for each particular grant, which are considered to be highly subjective to influence by political actors because they can be targeted in legislation towards something that is particular to that state.

2. Procurements: this category includes all government contracts and non-wage payments for products and services which it does not produce itself and is generally needed for the regular function of its agencies. For example, this could include payment to
a construction company for building a new federal building or payment to a paper company for printing paper. Some of them are auctioned to the lowest bidder, some are not because of earmarks.\footnote{Earmarks are federal funds provided for projects, programs, or grants that intentionally avoid applicable merit-based or competitive allocation processes, or specifies the location or recipient. Hence, these fall under the category of procurements but are not auctioned to the lowest bidder. Rather, they are special contracts giving by the congressman or Senator to the recipient of his or her choice. They can fall under the category of grants but are not allocated through a formula.}

I will focus on grants and procurements as the main vehicles for distributional awards to states with high electoral competition. They are the main dependent variables in some of the most recent highly influential studies–Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010); Gordan (2011); and Taylor (2008). Grants are of a particular focus in many studies because they are usually based on a formula which can change from year to year, and thus are highly susceptible to political influence in congress. Theoretically, the party of the presiding president should have a great deal of influence over the decision on where to allocate these grants. Moreover, grants are often awarded to general areas as opposed to individuals, businesses or organizations.

Since my data begins in 1993, beyond the time Alaska and Hawaii were admitted as states, it will always include the 50 states plus the district of Columbia in the analysis. Let the index for states be denoted by \(i \in \{1, \ldots, 51\}\). Thus, my data set is a balanced-panel without any missing values for any of the variables. 1993 is the earliest year in which the Census Bureau makes its Consolidated Federal Funds Report data available in digital format. This is the reason for the beginning of my panel starts in 1993 and ends in 2009. All of these variables are deflated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in order to be in real terms, using 1984 as the benchmark year.\footnote{The control variable, median income, is also in real terms, but in 2008 dollars. Thus, I divide it by the CPI index of benchmark year of 1984 to make everything in the same real terms.}
3.2 What Constitutes A Swing State?

First, I will define what I mean by “electorally competitive.” I will do this in two ways. The first will be the expected vote margin of the incumbent party using a more traditional measure. I calculate this margin only for the democrat and republican differential and not for the total vote count. This will be the main variable of interest in this paper. I will assume that the incumbent party is an adaptive learner: it will use the previous election results to forecast what the next election results will be. The Democratic vote margin in state $i$ at time $t$ is given by

$$D_{it} = \frac{TD_{it} - TR_{it}}{TD_{it} + TR_{it}}$$

(1)

where $TD_{it}$ stands for the total votes received by the Democrats in state $i$ at time $t$ and $TR_{it}$ is the total vote received by Republicans. Define

$$d_t = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if Democrat is incumbent in year } t \\
0 & \text{otherwise} 
\end{cases}$$

Then the incumbent vote margin is given by

$$M_{it} = D_{it}d_t - D_{it}(1 - d_t)$$

(2)

will be the expected incumbent vote share in state $i$ in election year $t$.

I use election years from 1972 to 2008. This is because the 1968 election was somewhat unusual in that it had a serious third party candidate running for office.\(^7\) As you can see from Figure 6, the Democrat margin has a high fluctuation in the overall trend for these years. But you can also see that Alabama, which is definitely not considered a swing state in 2008, fluctuates from being highly Republican to highly Democratic and then to highly

\(^7\)This is also somewhat true for 1980, but I do not consider Anderson as serious as a candidate as Wallace.
Republican again. But you can also see that most other states were highly Republican in 1972. So this is what the year effect, $\gamma_t$, are for. The time trend, $\theta_i t$, is there to take into account the change in voting of states like Alabama that swing from being highly Democrat in 1976 to highly Republican in 2008. Other states, like Wisconsin, are more stable, but still show a trend from being Republican to Democrat over the years.

My second measure of electoral competitiveness records how close each state is to being the one that tips the election in a tied vote, weighted by the electoral college. This is similar to what Stromberg (2008) would call the probability of being Florida. In order to capture the states that would be pivotal if the election were tied, I will create a measure $V_{it}$ (this is what I call the distance from “center mass”), that centers around zero for those states that would be center mass if the election were tied that year. The number of electoral college votes for each state is given by $EC_{it}$. The tricky part is calculating $V_{it}$, which ranks all of the states. Define $\overline{S}_{it}$ as the incumbent party vote share in state $i$ in election year $t$. Then I construct $V_{it} (s_{it}, c_t) = \overline{S}_{it} - c_t$ where $c_t$ is the center mass point for that presidential election. In order to find the center mass point, I need to find the optimal number for $d_t$, in which I use the following procedure. First, I rank the states plus D.C. by their vote share, denoted by $r_{it}$, for the incumbent party of that election year, 1 though 51. Then I select, $d_t$ as the number used for an index

$$I_{it} = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } r_{it} > d_t \\
-1 & \text{if } r_{it} \leq d_t
\end{cases}$$

such that when it is multiplied by the electoral college it minimizes the summation

$$\min_{d_t} \left| \sum_i (I_{it} \times EC_{it}) \right|$$

or, in other words, makes $\sum_i (I_{it} \times EC_{it})$ as close to zero as possible. The $c_t$ is the vote
share that corresponds to $d_i$ within a range of 3 electoral college votes because that is the minimum amount that any one state can have. If it is beyond this tolerance level, then I take the average of the two vote counts between positive and negative ranking values of $I_{it}$. Thus, assuming that the incumbent party uses the previous election’s vote share on which they base their calculations, the center mass (centered around zero) is the number in which states ranked close to it would tip the election in a nearly tied vote. This disregards whether the actual vote share was near 50%. Rather, it simply gives a measure of which states would be close in a tied election and which ones would always be out on the periphery (Utah, Alaska and Alabama for the Republicans and DC, Massachusetts, Rhode Island for the Democrats).

I will assume that the federal spending for one particular year was influenced by the most recent previous presidential election. And since presidential elections happen every four years, I will propagate all the election variables for non-presidential election years with the most recent past presidential election for the vote margin variable, $M_{it}$, and the center mass variable, $V_{it}$.\footnote{For example, I will use the 2004 election data not for 2004 but for 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.} Thus, $M_{2000}$ is actually the election data for 1996. For the vote margin variable, this means that only the past election matters. But the center mass variable is dependent on the whole distribution of election data. So it has less of an ability to change from year to year.

### 3.3 Control Variables

I use the standard set of control variables for this type of analysis that include the per capita land area, median income, the unemployment rate, and the percentage of persons age 65 years or older. The original values of median income were in real 2008 dollars, but I divided this by the consumer price index for 2008 in order to bring it to 1984 like all of the other spending data. The dependent and independent variables are very skewed toward zero. So I will use the natural log to transform them to get rid of some of the skewness.
3.4 Estimation Strategy

Since, according to swing voter theory, spending per capita in grants and procurements should increase when the margin of victory is close to zero, the graphical representation of the function \( y_{it} = f(\ldots, \overline{M}_{it}, \ldots) \) should look like that in Figure 1. As the vote margin is closer to zero, the spending per capita should increase. The same should be true for the graph of the function \( y_{it} = f(\ldots, V_{it}, \ldots) \): as states are closer to center mass, they should receive more per capita spending. Hence, the relationship will look something like an inverted U or V shaped function with the peak at zero, and one way of modeling this would be to use the absolute value function for both of these variables.

My estimation strategy is panel data analysis for a balanced data set with both year and time effects (a two-way model). Because of the skewness of the distributions, the baseline models will be in natural log form. The equations of interest are with the expected incumbent margin variable

\[
\ln (y_{it}) = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta_1 \ln (|\overline{M}_{it}|) + \beta_2 \ln (EC_{it}) + Z_{it}' \gamma + \epsilon_{it} \tag{4}
\]

and with the center mass variable

\[
\ln (y_{it}) = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta_1 \ln (|V_{it}|) + \beta_2 \ln (EC_{it}) + Z_{it}' \gamma + \epsilon_{it} \tag{5}
\]

where I assume that \( \epsilon_{it} \sim N(0, \sigma_{\epsilon(i)}^2) \). Here, \( y_{it} \) represents per capita spending in grants, and \( Z_{it} \) represents the vector of logged control variables and \( \gamma \) represents the vector of its regressors. For all of these equations, the swing voter theory predicts that the coefficients for \( |\overline{M}_{it}| \) and \( |V_{it}| \) will be negative—so that they look like the absolute value function in Figure 1—and statistically significant. Because Alaska and D.C. receive a disproportionately large amount of per capita funding, as can be seen in Figure 2 and in Figure 5, so I will omit
them from the data. The reason they are outliers is probably because the federal government
owns a large amount of land in Alaska and needs to spend a proportionally large amount of
money to maintain it and because D.C. is the center of federal government. Since this is a
panel data set, I will use panel corrected standard errors.

4 Results

According to Table 1, the coefficient for $|M_{it}|$ is positive but statistically insignificant. This
suggests that if there is any systematic behavior it is that the incumbent president sends
more money to core states rather than swing ones. But since it is statistically insignificant,
there is little reason to believe that this is the case. Also, the coefficient for $|V_{it}|$ is positive
and statistically insignificant, which strengthen the notion that the presidents do not cater
to swing states. Finally, these results are robust for procurements as the dependent variable.
In every case, the variable is positive and statistically insignificant. So the model shows that
the evidence points in the exact opposite way of what the theory predicts.

5 Discussion

I find that there is little to no evidence supporting the swing voter theory for U.S. presidential
elections in regards to per capita grant, procurement expenditures by state. The panel
regression results either show statistically insignificant results or coefficients that have the
wrong sign that would confirm the hypothesis.

This may be because voters respond less to pork barrel projects and more to policy than
they did in the past. So it seems that the results of this paper imply the days of Ferejohn
(1974) are over. However, Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010) and Kriner and Reeves (2012)
would disagree. Berry, Burden, and Howell (2010) would still argue that presidents try to
influence the outcome of congressional elections as opposed to presidential elections. And Kriner and Reeves (2012) would argue that voters still respond to these types of pork barrel projects. So why presidents do not use funding to influence their own electoral success is somewhat of a puzzle. Perhaps presidents receive less credit for federal projects in local areas whereas congressmen do.

This does not mean that vote buying is not present in these elections because pork barrel projects can take on many forms. It might be that the president tries to capitalize on the few projects that he was able to get for a swing state by advertising them very rigorously. However, although this would be a good extension to this study, this concept is much harder to measure.

A Data Appendix

The following are the variables I use and the data sources from which they come.

- Grants: total grant spending in that state. http://www.census.gov/govs/cffr/
- All election data come from http://www.uselectionatlas.org/
- Unemployment rate http://www.bls.gov/lau/data.htm
- Median income http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/index.html

References


Table 1: Fixed effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Grants</th>
<th></th>
<th>Procurements</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 (Std. Err.)</td>
<td>Model 2 (Std. Err.)</td>
<td>Model 1 (Std. Err.)</td>
<td>Model 2 (Std. Err.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumb margin</td>
<td>0.006 (0.005)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>0.018 (0.013)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral college</td>
<td>−0.097 (0.128)</td>
<td>−0.109 (0.128)</td>
<td>−0.020 (0.301)</td>
<td>−0.069 (0.308)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center mass</td>
<td>--- (0.010)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.021)</td>
<td>--- (0.021)</td>
<td>0.032 (0.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land area</td>
<td>0.287* (0.138)</td>
<td>0.271* (0.138)</td>
<td>1.08** (0.358)</td>
<td>1.029** (0.359)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income</td>
<td>−0.086 (0.089)</td>
<td>−0.094 (0.089)</td>
<td>−0.217 (0.189)</td>
<td>−0.234 (0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>−0.009 (0.031)</td>
<td>−0.013 (0.031)</td>
<td>0.172** (0.066)</td>
<td>0.164* (0.066)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent age ≥65</td>
<td>0.344 (0.204)</td>
<td>0.385 (0.203)</td>
<td>0.633 (0.540)</td>
<td>0.745* (0.545)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 833  833  833  833  
R²-adjusted: 0.039  0.037  0.083  0.086  
Breusch-Pagan χ²(2): 3470.529  3446.264  4181.886  4200.286  
F-value: 5.669  5.325  12.638  13.119  
Notes: All variables are in natural logarithm form. Alaska and DC were omitted from the regression due to their unusually high number of federal money in both grants and procurements.  
* Indicates significant at the 0.05 level.  
** Indicates significant at the 0.01 level.  
*** Indicates significant at the 0.001 level.
Figure 1: The swing voter theory as represented by a linear model where $\beta_1 < 0$. 
Figure 2: Time trend of federal grant amount.
Figure 3: The distributions of dependent and independent variables.
Figure 4: The distribution of dependent and independent variables.

\textbf{log( expected incumbent margin (abs value))}

\textbf{log( center mass (abs value))}
Figure 5: This graph shows the relationship between per capita spending in grants and the expected incumbent margin weighted by the electoral college. Alaska is in red and D.C. is in blue. Clearly, they receive much more in per capita terms in federal spending than any other state.
Figure 6: The time trend of the Democratic margin of victory.