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Sending the Money Back Home? Pork Barrel Politics in Closed-List PR

ABSTRACT

Serbia employs one of the most rigid electoral systems in Europe: closed-list proportional representation within a single national constituency. This system is characterised by complete depersonalization, as candidates' re-election depends on their placement on lists controlled by party heads, rather than voter support. Despite these structural disincentives for cultivating personal votes, initial research

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reveals a surprising correlation between the representation of local governments in the National Assembly and patterns of resource allocation to local subdivisions. This study analyses the relationship between deputies' residency and financial transfers from the national level, including subsidies, local budget expenditures, and surpluses or deficits, to the local levels of government and impact of national representation on local fiscal dynamics. The analysis controls for variables such as population size, development levels, unemployment rates, age demographics, and social welfare reliance, using data from 145 Serbian municipalities between 2013 and 2023. First findings indicate that pork barrel politics persists even in an electoral system that discourages personal vote cultivation, primarily benefiting over-presented municipalities through subsidies and project financing. The research will further explore the role of political alignment between local and national governments, particularly following the 2016 local elections that resulted in the unification of political power at both levels across many municipalities, typical of hybrid regimes such as Serbia in a given period. This alignment is examined as a potential driver of political favoritism of certain local governments in pork barrel resource allocation.

KEYWORDS: pork barrel, public spending, local representation, closed-list PR, territorial representation, Serbian parliament

INTRODUCTION

Politicians seek to maximise their chances of re-election in various ways, one of the most prominent being the strategic allocation of budgetary resources to target groups capable of delivering a reliable pool of votes. Such groups may include particular social categories (e.g., families, pensioners), interest-based economic constituencies (entrepreneurs, workers, farmers), ethno-religious communities in multiethnic societies, or voters concentrated in certain territorial units. The latter may intertwine with institutional mechanisms, where representatives are elected in specific constituencies and thus face electoral incentives to direct resources to their districts, or of local administrative units with which candidates maintain strong social ties, such as their hometowns or places of residence. In this regard, pork barrel politics is a well-documented phenomenon, describing how political decision-makers channel public funds into geographically targeted projects and programs for the purpose of advancing electoral or partisan objectives. Unsurprisingly, such practices are most pronounced in candidate-centered electoral systems, particularly those organised around territorially well-defined constituencies. In these systems, the electoral connection between representatives and their

voters is both institutionalised and personalised, giving rise to expectations of constituency service and transactional relationships based on what a representative can deliver to their community. Consequently, the incentives for cultivating a personal vote in such context are significantly stronger.

However, some studies have shown that such practices are not confined exclusively to single-member district systems. Politicians operating under other electoral arrangements also attempt, in various ways, to put their discretionary control over budgetary resources in the service of re-election or broader political gain, typically through forms of geographic favoritism. In this respect, Serbia represents an intriguing case, since the country employs one of the most rigid electoral systems in Europe, both in terms of personalization and territorial representation. Since 2000, the country has used closed-list proportional representation within a single nationwide constituency, in which candidates are nominated on electoral lists entirely under the control of party leaders, leaving voters with no influence over which individuals are elected. Moreover, the single national constituency introduces structural disincentives for cultivating a personal vote: interpersonal social connections (so-called “friends and neighbors” voting) become less significant, while voters primarily support party lists as a whole, usually represented by the party leader. This depersonalization extends across the board, as even at the local level, where mayors are not directly elected, citizens also vote for party lists, which usually reflect (or mimic) national political dynamics.

All of this should, in principle, depress incentives for pork barrel politics. Nevertheless, geographic proximity is widely regarded as an important informational shortcut for voters even in non-majoritarian electoral systems (Shugart, Valdini and Suominen 2005). This is precisely the focus of our research, which examines the case of Serbia and its closed-list PR. Serbia is also an interesting case due to its broader contextual environment. The country has been in a continuous state of democratic decline, clearly reflected in reports of international organizations, which some years ago began classifying it as a hybrid regime (Freedom House 2020) or an electoral autocracy (V-Dem 2019). The student-led protests that began in late 2024 further call into question the democratic credentials of the ruling regime. Although elections are held regularly and retain a degree of competitiveness, their fairness is highly questionable. While all the formal legal prerequisites for democratic elections exist, in practice the playing field is heavily tilted in favor of the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS), which has unparalleled access to funding, media, and state institutions, while the opposition faces persistent obstacles to its political activity – a setting more than familiar in hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010).

Since 2016, the SNS has employed mechanisms such as the nationalization of local elections to seize political power in cities and municipalities across Serbia. Election observers have repeatedly documented manipulation in the form of misuse of public resources, the conflation of party and state activities by

ruling officials, voter intimidation and pressure, misuse of welfare funds, and highly unbalanced media coverage (ODIHR 2017). As a result, only a handful of local administrations in Serbia have remained outside the control of the ruling party, most of them in ethnic minority-inhabited areas. This deliberate effort to conquer all vertical levels of government within a regime that already exhibits features of state capture (Pavlović 2022) provides a valuable context for studying the role of fiscal allocation in such settings and the extent to which these practices overplay with pork barrel politics under closed-list PR. This is particularly relevant given that we can compare allocation and local favoritism before 2016, when a number of municipalities were aligned with the ruling SNS but many were not.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. We begin with the theoretical framework, which primarily reviews existing studies on personal vote-seeking, pork barrel politics in the context of different electoral rules that should (theoretically) either encourage or discourage such practices, and the phenomenon of local favoritism. Some of these studies emphasise the distinctive dynamics of Central and Eastern Europe; however, pork barrel is by no means confined to this region. This section also introduces the hypotheses to be further tested. The subsequent section presents the data and methodological approach, followed by the empirical findings. Finally, the chapter offers a discussion of the results and their implications, and concludes with broader reflections on the role of fiscal allocation and local favoritism under closed-list PR systems and regime types like the one in Serbia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WHY VOTERS VOTE FOR WHAT THEY KNOW – AND DOES THAT PAY OFF?

People tend to vote for candidates they recognise or identify with, whether through shared race, class, or ethnic background, making descriptive representation a core concept in theories of political representation (Pitkin 1967). Territorial proximity further reinforces this effect, particularly in electoral systems with small, candidate-centered constituencies, where voters often feel a sense of familiarity and positive attachment toward local candidates. And vice versa, it seems that candidates are more comfortable campaigning in familiar surroundings (Lancaster 1986).

The phenomenon of “friends and neighbours voting” is widely recognised, influencing both voter behavior and party candidate selection. Parties frequently rely on locally known candidates to maximise electoral support, a pattern observed especially in majoritarian systems (Rice and Macht 1987; Evans et al. 2017) as well as in candidate-focused variants of other electoral systems, such as Ireland (Gorecki and Marsh 2012) or Germany’s mixed-member system (Schulte-Cloos and Bauer 2023). In these countries, strong ties between

candidates and geographically defined constituencies create incentives to cultivate personal votes, which are crucial for securing election or re-election (Carey and Shugart 1995). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that candidates running in or near their place of residence enjoy a measurable electoral advantage, sometimes even in countries where institutional rules do not explicitly promote personalised voting or localised political competition (Nyholt 2024). Territorial connection, therefore, emerges as a key factor shaping both descriptive and substantive forms of representation.

Several studies have identified similar geography-driven patterns of vote maximization even in proportional representation systems. Political parties, aware of this dynamic, often seek to enhance their chances of success by presenting geographically balanced and locally attuned candidate lists (Tavits 2010; Latner and McGann 2005). Even in extreme cases where institutional incentives to account for political geography are virtually absent, such as Israel and the Netherlands, which operate under a single nationwide district with effectively closed-list PR, parties still construct geographically balanced lists to appeal to voters across different regions. This suggests that locality remains one of the crucial factors to take into account when nominating, and subsequently, voting.

Two main theoretical explanations account for the attractiveness of local candidates. The first emphasises group-based favoritism, or affective bias toward “one of our own”. The second highlights instrumental considerations, whereby voters expect a local candidate to address community concerns. Hence, locality functions either as shorthand for descriptive representation, signaling shared identity; or as a proxy for substantive representation, implying that the candidate will advocate for the material interests of the group they represent (Campbell et al. 2019). The second explanation is particularly studied in political science in connection with the phenomenon of pork barrel politics. In that sense, a candidate’s geographic proximity serves as a signal to voters: that they understand local needs and will act on their behalf – a strategy some candidates deliberately employ in campaigns and image-building to positively influence voter perceptions (see Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Munis 2022). For well-networked and locally rooted candidates, this represents a low-cost strategy with potentially high electoral returns (Lancaster 1986).

Incumbents enjoy a comparative advantage in signaling localism, as their ongoing activities in legislative or executive bodies allow them to leverage their positions of influence to increase both policy impact and visibility (Borghetto et al. 2020). One prominent mechanism is the direct allocation of budgetary resources to specific local interests. The use of public funds to secure political outcomes is acknowledged in political science: the electoral budget cycle – the tendency for public spending to increase in the final year of a government’s term – demonstrates precisely how incumbent parties attempt to boost re-election prospects through heightened fiscal allocation (Klomp and de Haan 2013).

In the case of pork barrel politics, however, the focus is not on government-wide spending but on the targeted efforts of individual politicians to direct fiscal resources within their spheres of influence, for example through amendments, legislative proposals, or committee work, toward geographically significant areas to cultivate votes and secure re-election (Pedron and Wessel 2025). A large body of research in that area is focusing on the United States, both because of the highly personalised nature of its single-member district system (Lancaster 1986) and the substantial influence that elected representatives have over fiscal policy (see Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen 1981; Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Simply put, in such systems it is immediately clear which representative serves which district, and the impact of their actions during the pre-election period can be easily assessed by both voters and their respective parties, allowing the relationship with a geographically defined electorate to be observed through concrete benefits delivered to constituents.

Some of the more recent studies expectedly confirm the existence of pork barrel in other single-member district systems, such as the United Kingdom, where researchers found a direct link between increases in local community funding and the vote share of the governing party, regardless of the level of development (i.e., the needs) of the local authority (Lattmann 2024). Lattmann also notes that pork barrel effects on vote share do not appear when the incumbent MP belongs to an opposition party, suggesting that fiscal allocations are perceived as a prerogative of the ruling majority, independent of any potential positive impact an opposition representative might have in the parliament. Other studies also identify party affiliation and incumbency status as mediating factors (Atilano-Tang and Moreno 2023), indicating potential advantages for officeholders belonging to the governing majority.

However, despite the widespread practice, the overall effects of pork barrel politics remain somewhat inconclusive (for a review, Spáč 2021), as it is not yet fully clear under which conditions such behavior benefits incumbents. Importantly, no study disputes the existence of these practices as a strategy for re-election; the debate concerns primarily whether they consistently yield positive electoral outcomes for the actors employing them, and to what extent.

The pork barrel is particularly intriguing because it seemingly exists even in systems that do not inherently encourage localism or personalised voting. In Italy's mixed electoral system, for example, Carozzi and Repetto (2016) found that members of parliament favor their hometowns in budget allocations, which receive, on average, 2% more in per capita state transfers than other areas. Norway, which employs a closed-list system with multi-seat constituencies, shows a statistically significant increase in vote share for parties fielding local candidates, alongside higher levels of public investment in municipalities represented by those candidates (Fiva and Halse 2016). This effect is especially pronounced when local and national authorities belong to the same party, suggesting a clear favoritism toward certain local constituencies. Germany's mixed system also fosters pork barrel practices, with

redistribution occurring primarily through committee structures (Stratmann and Baur 2002). Representatives elected in single-member districts are often members of those committees which can directly allocate funds and projects, such as infrastructural, to their constituencies; whereas those elected via party lists typically serve on committees overseeing broader policy areas such as foreign affairs, justice, or social policy. Some studies document similar allocation patterns at subnational levels: for instance, federal ministers' actions positively correlate with the economic performance of their municipalities of residence (Baskaran and Lopes da Fonseca 2021), highlighting local favoritism as a significant aspect of pork barreling.

A comparable case is observed in South Korea, where the residence locations of regional governors receive, on average, 20% more in discretionary budget allocations (Hwang and Lee 2025). In contrast, a study in Poland suggests that discretionary budget allocations are less driven by hometown bias and more by political favoritism, substantially benefiting municipal authorities aligned with the national government (Gendźwiłł et al. 2025). In unconsolidated or backsliding democracies, these patterns reflect the nationalization of local elections, where ruling parties leverage national political dynamics to secure advantages in local electoral contests, which is also documented in Serbia, though in the context of electoral engineering and manipulation rather than fiscal policy (Vučićević and Bursać 2022).

Weak democratic frameworks and unconsolidated institutions have certainly allowed the pork barrel politics to become common practice in Central and Eastern European countries (Tóth et al. 2021; Mačkić and Rusmir 2024). The Hungarian case is particularly noteworthy for our study, as it represents a regime type closely comparable to Serbia: not only in terms of the regime characteristics (Losoncz 2022) but also as an example of state capture (Pavlović 2022), where pork barrel favoritism toward local governments controlled by the national ruling party, coupled with various disfavorings of opposition-led municipalities, manifests in project allocations that are more than twice as large as those for non-aligned localities (Vasvári 2024).

An earlier study for Serbia revealed a strong correlation between the representation of local administrative units (cities and municipalities) in the National Assembly and patterns of resource allocation to local governments, despite the fact that the Serbian electoral system is highly unfavorable to any form of personalised or territorially-based representation, and that the National Assembly in practice has limited influence over budgetary distribution. In such an institutional environment, there are minimal incentives for MPs to secure financial benefits for voters in their local communities; instead, elected representatives remain fully subordinated to their party leaders, both during candidate selection and later coordination of legislative activities. Nevertheless, Bursać and Vučićević (2023) find a statistically significant increase in central-level budget inflows to municipalities and cities that are over-presented in the Serbian parliament, while territorially underrepresented

local governments receive comparatively fewer allocations: particularly for funds requiring political discretion, such as subsidies and transfers affecting local budget balances. According to that study, for every increase of two parliamentary representatives, a local government can expect an additional 1.8 million euros in annual subsidies and an average annual budget balance higher by 555 thousand euros. Previous evidence thus indicates the existence of geographic patterns in budgetary allocation correlated with parliamentary presence, a finding that warrants further investigation.

The authors' intention is to replicate the mentioned study within an identical closed-list PR framework in Serbia, using a broader temporal sample and a larger set of intermediate variables, while introducing a new dimension of political favoritism: the alignment of local governments with the ruling party. Since 2016, there has been a notable *Gleichschaltung* of local authorities with the national majority, driven by democratic backsliding, increased centralization and authoritarianism, and elements of state capture, resulting in the current situation in which fewer than 5% of local governments are not controlled by the Serbian Progressive Party and its partners. This provides an opportunity not just to compare patterns of budgetary allocation before and after changes in local government control, but also to draw conclusions about the use of pork barrel politics in a hybrid regime.

Accordingly, the hypothetical framework of our study is twofold, providing a comprehensive picture of both the emergence and the use of political budgeting to secure electoral advantage:

H1: The level of a local government's representation in parliament positively affects the level of central-level subsidies and the budgetary surplus of the local government unit; that is, these indicators increase as representation rises.

H2: Alignment of local ruling parties with national-level ruling parties positively affects the level of central-level subsidies and the budgetary surplus of the local government unit; that is, local governments governed by the national ruling party are favored.

DATA AND METHODS

We assemble a balanced municipality-year panel covering 145 Serbian local governments over the 2013–2023 period ($N = 1\,595$). Indicators are drawn from the Government of Serbia's Analytical Service for Local Governments (Republic Secretariat for Public Policies – RSJP 2025), which reports harmonised, annually updated municipal statistics across four domains used here: basic population data, public finance, economy, and social protection. Two variables are author-constructed: representational bias (our calculation

based on the distribution of national-parliament seats by municipal origin) and local executive partisanship/alignment (coded from official election results and administrative records).

Serbia is a suitable context for studying distributive politics under centralised fiscal arrangements and closed-list PR. The combination of high vertical fiscal centralization, frequent electoral cycles, and a dominant-party environment after 2012 generates clear opportunities for national-to-local favoritism to appear in observable budget lines. At the same time, broad cross-municipal variation in parliamentary representation alongside limited local partisan turnover provides leverage to isolate the parliamentary channel from local office-holding effects. Finally, the availability of consistent, full-coverage municipal data for eleven consecutive years makes the setting empirically tractable for testing pork barrel mechanisms.

Building on these sources, we analyse four outcomes. First, we use transfers per capita (EUR), defined by RSJP as transfers from higher tiers divided by the estimated mid-year municipal population, encompassing non-earmarked (general-purpose) and earmarked (specific-purpose) transfers; this series is governed by statutory allocation rules and serves as a benchmark where political effects are least expected. Second, we use total expenditures per capita (EUR) as a high-level measure of municipal fiscal activity. Third, we focus on subsidies expressed in thousands of euros (RSJP Indicator 49 – subsidies to public utilities/organizations and private firms), which are the most plausibly discretionary line through which national-to-local favoritism would materialise; when modeling this level outcome, we include population (in thousands) to separate scale from intensity. Finally, we examine the annual budget balance (in thousands of euros), defined as total revenues and receipts minus total expenditures and outlays (RSJP Indicator 64), with positive values indicating surplus. For indicators that RSJP reports in multiple formats (nominal RSD, real RSD, EUR), we rely on the EUR series as published (period-average exchange rate). In an alternative, distribution-aware specification, we replace population with $\ln(\text{population})$ and include a dummy for Belgrade to account for the heavy right tail and capital-specific scale effects. City municipalities (municipalities formed within one city as second-tier local units) are not included due to incomplete and non-comparable coverage, leaving 145 local units (cities and municipalities) observed throughout.

Our key explanatory variables capture national parliamentary leverage and local executive partisanship. Representational bias is computed for each municipality-year as the difference between that municipality's share of all sitting MPs (by officially registered residence) and its share of the national population; positive values indicate over-representation and negative values under-representation. Because fiscal decisions for year t are enacted at the end of $t-1$, MP residence data from year $t-1$ are paired with fiscal outcomes in year t , including 2013 (status measured at end-2012). Local executive status is coded into four mutually exclusive categories – SNS mayor, SNS-partner mayor (parties

in the national governing coalition), opposition mayor, and citizens' group mayor – using official election results and administrative records; these indicators are likewise lagged so that the status at the end of $t-1$ maps to fiscal year t .

All models include standard demographic and socioeconomic controls drawn from RSJP. We account for the statutory five-tier development classification that the central government uses in intergovernmental finance (Group I: above the national average; II: 80–100% of the average; III: 60–80%; IV: 50–60%; IV-a: devastated areas below 50%), as well as the share of residents aged 65+, unemployment per 1 000 inhabitants, and the share of cash-assistance beneficiaries. Population (in thousands) is included whenever the dependent variable is in levels (e.g., subsidies in 000 EUR, budget balance in 000 EUR) and omitted for per-capita outcomes.

We estimate linear mixed-effects models on municipality-year data with a full set of year fixed effects to absorb common shocks and nominal trends. The specification includes a municipality-level random intercept to capture time-invariant differences across localities and allows for heteroskedasticity across years within municipalities. Substantive conclusions are unchanged when the model is estimated without the municipality-level random intercept.

This design faces two limitations. First, local partisan alignment exhibits very limited within-municipality variation after 2016, which constrains power to detect conditional effects and shifts identification toward cross-municipal differences and the parliamentary representation channel. Second, under closed-list PR, representational bias may partly reflect strategic list-building by party leaders (and coalition brokers) rather than purely exogenous constituency representation: winnable slots can be allocated with geographic considerations in mind, potentially correlating over- or under-representation with parties' electoral or programmatic priorities. The inclusion of socioeconomic controls and year fixed effects mitigates such concerns but cannot fully eliminate them. In addition, as with any administrative dataset, minor changes in budgetary classifications or reporting practices may occur over time, and MPs are linked to municipalities by officially registered residence, which may not perfectly coincide with their *de facto* place of political activity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Across four dependent variables, political patterns are selective rather than general. We find clear and stable associations between parliamentary over-/under-representation (representational bias) and discretionary spending lines: subsidies rise with greater over-representation, and budget balances are more favorable in over-represented municipalities. By contrast, there is no systematic relationship for transfers per capita – where statutory formulas dominate; or for total expenditures per capita. Measures of local executive alignment (SNS, SNS-partner, opposition, citizens' groups) do not yield consistent effects once representational bias, year fixed effects, and socioeconomic covariates are accounted for.

Variables	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Skew.	Kurt.	N
Transfers per capita (EUR)	127.74	109.00	99.87	0	1096	3.36	19.87	1595
Total expenditures per capita (EUR)	353.34	303.00	174.33	121	1985	3.33	17.64	1594
Subsidies (000 EUR)	1315.39	229	8154.92	0	127035	12.23	164.46	1595
Budget balance (000 EUR)	143.61	31.5	3350.41	-80786	63050	-2.95	313.15	1594
Representational bias	0	-0.17	1.57	-1.18	25.08	11.80	152.38	1595
Population (thousand)	49.91	21.21	143.78	1.02	1694.48	10.29	113.51	1595
Share aged 65+ (%)	22.23	21.8	4.79	6.3	41.4	0.42	1.86	1595
Unemployment per 1000	99.61	93	47.89	12	284	0.73	0.35	1595
Cash-assistance beneficiaries (% of pop.)	4.393	3.1	3.54	0.07	20.74	1.41	2.10	1595
	Count	Share						
SNS mayor	1096	68.97						1589
SNS-partner mayor	244	15.35						1589
Opposition mayor	195	12.27						1589
Citizens' group mayor	54	3.39						1589
Development group I	220	13.79						1595
Development group II	374	23.45						1595
Development group III	517	32.41						1595
Development group IV	275	17.24						1595
Development group IV-a	209	13.10						1595

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptives in Table 1 indicate distributional extremity on level outcomes. Subsidies are strongly right-skewed, and the annual budget balance is heavy-tailed with a longer left side (occasional very large deficits), while per-capita outcomes remain right-skewed but far less extreme. Representational bias is centered slightly below zero (median negative) with a long upper tail; this tail reflects the clustering of MPs' registered residence in major urban centers (notably Belgrade), rather than small municipalities sending a single MP. Over 2013-2023, the distribution of local executive alignment is strongly skewed – especially after 2016 – yielding 1 096 SNS, 244 SNS-partner, 195 opposition, and 54 citizens' group mayor-years ($N = 1\,589$; six mayor-years missing due to unverifiable mayoral affiliation in Ljubovija, Bogatić, and Kladovo). These distributional features motivate the inclusion of population when modeling level outcomes and inform the interpretation of the selective political patterns reported below.

For transfers per capita (Table 2, Models 1–2), the estimates behave exactly as a rules-based system would predict. Needs and equalization proxies – statutory development group, the share aged 65+, and the share of cash-assistance beneficiaries – enter positively and significantly, while parliamentary representational bias is null and local partisan alignment adds no signal. This pattern aligns with the classic finding that formula-driven intergovernmental grants primarily track demographic need and fiscal capacity rather than short-run politics. Unemployment per 1 000 carries a small negative sign; given its modest magnitude and overlap with other need indicators, this likely reflects collinearity among socioeconomic proxies rather than a substantive penalty for high-unemployment municipalities. Adding mayoral dummies leaves the core inference unchanged; one coalition indicator (SNS-partner) is positive and statistically detectable, but the effect is modest ($\approx \text{€}7$ per capita) and we refrain from strong substantive interpretation. Year fixed effects soak up common macro trends and periodic adjustments to allocation parameters. In short, transfers per capita look formula-governed, as anticipated, which bolsters confidence in the research design and in interpreting any political patterns on more discretionary budget lines later in the analysis.

For total expenditures per capita (Table 2, models 3–4), we likewise find no systematic association with parliamentary representational bias, and the standard socioeconomic controls (development group, age structure, unemployment, cash-assistance share) do not exhibit stable relationships either. This pattern is consistent with the structure of per-capita outlays: they combine own-source revenues with mandated service floors and episodic capital spending, while equalization and minimum-service requirements compress cross-sectional differences that might otherwise track need indicators. Adding mayoral dummies leaves the core inference unchanged; a modest negative coefficient for opposition mayors ($\approx \text{€}13$ per capita) appears in the expanded specification but is not robust across reasonable variants and does not overturn the absence of a general political signal. Taken together with the transfers results, the lack of partisan patterns in broad per-capita spending motivates the shift to more discretionary budget lines in the analysis that follows.

Table 2. Multilevel estimates for transfers per capita and total expenditures per capita, 2013–2023

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	35.098	34.747	556.203***	560.280***
	(25.200)	(25.254)	(47.211)	(47.352)
Representational bias	.203	.376	-.525	-.541
	(1.103)	(1.111)	(2.355)	(2.359)
Development index (1–5)	35.890***	35.827***	1.119	1.323
	(4.161)	(4.179)	(7.986)	(8.021)
Share aged 65+ (%)	1.953**	1.913**	-.093	-.328
	(.921)	(.924)	(1.735)	(1.742)
Unemployment per 1000	-.134**	-.115*	-.076	-.057
	(.062)	(.062)	(.115)	(.116)
Cash-assistance beneficiaries (%)	2.274***	2.207**	.187	.187
	(.857)	(.858)	(1.609)	(1.613)
SNS partner mayor		7.045*		-.082
		(2.762)		(5.333)
Opposition mayor		-3.161		-12.723*
		(2.944)		(5.697)
Citizens' group mayor		-4.805		-7.637
		(4.183)		(8.068)
SD (Random intercept: municipality)	55.39	55.66	106.79	107.34
N	1595	1589	1595	1589
LogLik	-8117.94	-8070.33	-8969.85	-8958.83
AIC	16259.88	16164.66	17963.71	17941.65
BIC	16324.25	16228.96	18028.03	18005.95
Average ICC	0.685	0.580	0.637	0.641
Marginal R ²	0.445	0.448	0.338	0.341
Conditional R ²	0.763	0.768	0.760	0.764

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Year fixed effects included (not shown). Random intercept at municipality level; residuals allowed to differ by year (Diagonal). Estimation via REML with Satterthwaite df. EUR series as reported by RSJP. Representational bias and mayor-status dummies are lagged t–1. Reference category for mayor dummies = SNS mayor. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Subsidies (level outcome) display a pronounced parliamentary channel. In the baseline specification with standard controls and year fixed effects (see: Table 3, model 5), representational bias is strongly and precisely positive: municipalities that are more over-represented in the national parliament receive markedly higher subsidies. Substantively, the point estimate implies that a +0.10 increase in representational bias is associated with roughly +€214k in subsidies, and a move of +0.50 (e.g., from balanced representation to moderate over-representation) corresponds to about +€1.07 million – magnitudes that are large relative to typical municipal budgets. As expected for a level outcome, population size strongly scales subsidies, and the statutory development grouping also captures systematic level differences across municipalities (coding: 1 = Group IV-a to 5 = Group I). Other socioeconomic controls do not show stable associations once population and year fixed effects are in place. Taken together, these results align with the interpretation that, in a centralised, closed-list PR setting, parliamentary representation provides a lever through which discretionary funds are steered, whereas broad, rule-bound aggregates (shown above) remain largely insensitive to short-run politics.

The model fit is informative about the nature of subsidy allocation. Marginal and conditional R^2 are high, while the intraclass correlation (ICC) is modest, indicating that most explained variation operates through observed, policy-salient covariates – most notably representational bias and scale (population) – rather than through time-invariant municipal differences soaked up by the random intercept. Substantively, this pattern is consistent with a discretionary instrument: subsidies respond to observable, shifting levers rather than to entrenched, locality-fixed traits. Unlike transfers and per-capita expenditures – where year fixed effects trace a smooth, decade-long nominal climb consistent with formulas and common shocks – subsidies show no monotonic time pattern. Estimated year fixed effects are irregular and the residual variance differs sharply across years, which is exactly what one would expect if allocations are driven by episodic bailouts of public utilities, program cycles in agriculture and industry, reclassifications, and other lumpy injections. In short, the subsidy series bears the signature of targeted, event-driven discretion rather than a steady rule-bound drift.

Adding mayoral alignment does not alter the core inference (see Table 3, model 6). The parliamentary channel remains large and precisely estimated, while the alignment dummies are jointly insignificant. The point estimate on opposition mayors is positive but imprecise and not robust across reasonable variants; given very limited within-municipality turnover after 2016 and the strong scaling of subsidies by population, we read this as noise rather than evidence of favoritism toward opposition-led municipalities. Two composite forces could generate a weak positive sign without implying a partisan premium: (i) episodic bailouts of large public utilities and enterprise programs can cluster in a few urban jurisdictions that, at times, were governed by opposition; and (ii) region- and period-specific cycles that are not tied to the mayor's party.

Table 3. Multilevel estimates for subsidies (thousand EUR), 2013–2023

	Model 5	Model 6
(Intercept)	-1676.672**	-1770.168**
	(752.990)	(749.343)
Representational bias	2137.804***	2143.150***
	(68.772)	(68.694)
Development index (1–5)	371.145***	370.698***
	(107.922)	(107.122)
Share aged 65+ (%)	20.952	25.959
	(26.065)	(25.952)
Unemployment per 1000	-3.479	-3.943*
	(2.155)	(2.162)
Cash-assistance beneficiaries (%)	11.358	14.590
	(27.921)	(27.882)
Population (in thousands)	40.252***	40.216***
	(1.268)	(1.264)
SNS partner mayor		-138.970
		(108.592)
Opposition mayor		184.828
		(123.637)
Citizens' group mayor		-136.583
		(181.407)
SD (Random intercept: municipality)	1308.48	1296.20
N	1595	1589
LogLik	-14510.78	-14442.10
AIC	29045.55	28908.21
BIC	29109.92	28972.51
Average ICC	0.146	0.144
Marginal R ²	0.832	0.833
Conditional R ²	0.856	0.857

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Year fixed effects included (not shown). Random intercept at the municipality level; residuals allowed to differ by year (Diagonal). Estimation via REML with Satterthwaite df. Monetary series use the RSJP EUR format (period-average exchange rate); subsidies are reported in thousand EUR. Representational bias and mayor-status dummies are lagged $t-1$. Population (in thousands) included for scaling. Reference category for mayor dummies = SNS mayor. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

To probe a concrete contextual hypothesis – the 2012–2016 period when Bojan Pajtić (DS) led the Vojvodina provincial government – we ran targeted checks focused on that window. Specifically, because there are no opposition-led municipalities in Vojvodina after 2016, we examined Opposition $\times$ Vojvodina within the pre-2016 subsample (and, separately, added a Vojvodina main effect in the full sample). Empirically, we do find a province-wide “Vojvodina premium” in subsidies irrespective of the mayor’s party, but the Opposition $\times$ Vojvodina differential is small and statistically unstable; core coefficients – including the representational-bias effect and the scale effect of population – are unchanged. Since these checks neither uncover a robust partisan mechanism nor alter our main inference, we do not report an additional model. Consistent with the design, systematic variation in subsidies is accounted for by parliamentary representation and scale, not by the party label of the local executive.

For the budget balance in thousands of euros (see: Table 4, Models 7–9), the results again point to a selective political channel. Representational bias is large, precisely estimated, and consistently positive across all specifications: over-represented municipalities post more favorable balances. By contrast, standard socioeconomic controls and population do not show stable associations, and adding per-capita expenditures (Model 8) or mayoral dummies (Model 9) leaves the core inference unchanged. Substantively, this is plausible for a level balance: it is the residual of volatile revenue inflows and spending outlays, so scale (population) need not map linearly into the net position, while parliamentary access can tilt the balance through discretionary inflows and episodic support.

Model diagnostics reinforce this interpretation. The random intercept collapses to zero, indicating no persistent municipality-specific component once observables and year fixed effects are included; marginal and conditional R^2 are correspondingly low, reflecting the inherently noisy, shock-driven nature of annual balances (rather than the absence of a political signal). Year fixed effects are jointly significant but irregular, and residual variance differs sharply across years – consistent with one-off arrears clearances, extraordinary transfers, or lumpy capital operations that move the net position without generating a smooth trend. In short, the balance behaves like a high-variance fiscal outcome with a clear parliamentary tilt but little evidence of systematic advantages tied to local executive partisanship or time-invariant municipal traits.

Table 4. Multilevel estimates for budget balance (thousand EUR), 2013–2023

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
(Intercept)	-258.958 (750.022)	-68.210 (767.474)	-38.399 (771.992)
Representational bias	954.047*** (62.812)	965.441*** (61.096)	964.093*** (64.718)
Development index (1–5)	-18.120 (45.210)	-21.032 (44.042)	-25.893 (46.035)
Share aged 65+ (%)	-13.293 (10.703)	-10.535 (10.546)	-10.369 (11.264)
Unemployment per 1000	-1.297 (1.190)	-1.210 (1.156)	-1.145 (1.208)
Cash-assistance beneficiaries (%)	-11.621 (13.333)	-10.552 (12.932)	-10.501 (13.496)
Population (in thousands)	.290 (.800)	.390 (.784)	.185 (.819)
Budget expenditure (per capita)		-.482 (.375)	-.510 (.385)
SNS partner mayor			1.602 (119.245)
Opposition mayor			6.366 (127.977)
Citizens' group mayor			-31.174 (204.505)
SD (Random intercept: municipality)	0	0	0
N	1595	1595	1589
LogLik	-14495.87	-14495.85	-14427.18
AIC	29015.74	28991.70	28854.36
BIC	29080.10	29080.05	28942.65
Average ICC	0	0	0
Marginal R ²	0.035	0.036	0.036
Conditional R ²	0.035	0.036	0.036

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Year fixed effects included (not shown). Random intercept at the municipality level; residuals allowed to differ by year (Diagonal). Estimated via REML with Satterthwaite df. Monetary series are reported in EUR by RSJP (period-average exchange rate); budget balance is in thousand EUR. Representational bias and mayor-status dummies are lagged t–1. Population (in thousands) included for scaling. Reference category for mayor dummies = SNS mayor. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

What if a municipality's parliamentary representation increased by roughly one MP; i.e., a +0.4 shift in representational bias? In the subsidy models (see Table 3), this implies about €855k higher annual subsidies ($0.4 \times 2\,137.8$ in thousand EUR), *ceteris paribus*. Two equivalent readings help anchor the magnitude: first, given the population slope ($\beta \approx 40.252$ thousand EUR per 1 000 residents), the one-MP shift is roughly equivalent to adding ≈ 21.3 thousand residents; second, relative to the development gradient ($\beta \approx 371.1$ thousand EUR per step on the statutory 1-5 scale), the same one-MP shift corresponds to ≈ 2.3 development levels. For the budget balance (see: Table 4), +0.4 in representational bias maps to €382-386k more favorable net balances per year ($0.4 \times [954-965]$ in thousand EUR); notably, the near-zero population slope in these models indicates that this is not a scale artifact. As a purely illustrative translation, in a hypothetical municipality of 50 000 residents, the implied changes amount to roughly €17 per capita in subsidies and €7-8 per capita in the balance, with other covariates and year fixed effects held constant.¹

We conducted a set of design-consistent checks that leave the core inference unchanged. On placebo lines – transfers per capita and total expenditures per capita – the estimates behave as a rules-based system would predict: representational bias is null once needs and year fixed effects are accounted for (see Table 2). Keeping levels as the policy-relevant metric but addressing scale nonlinearity via $\ln(\text{population})$ and adding a dummy for Belgrade leaves the parliamentary slope on discretionary lines intact.

A per-capita specification for subsidies (EUR per resident, population omitted) likewise retains a positive, statistically detectable slope. Highly conservative variants that either compress the upper tail (log outcomes) or flexibly absorb capital-specific year shocks ($\text{Belgrade} \times \text{year}$) substantially weaken the slope on both discretionary outcomes – and in some specifications produce sign instability – so we report them as stress tests rather than preferred alternatives. Focused probes of the 2012–2016 Vojvodina window recover a province-wide premium but no robust $\text{Opposition} \times \text{Vojvodina}$ differential; the parliamentary and scale effects remain essentially the same. Taken together, the pattern is selective but robust: parliamentary over-representation tilts both discretionary lines – subsidies and budget balance – whereas rule-bound per-capita aggregates remain insensitive to short-run politics.

1 In a distribution-aware specification that keeps levels as dependent variables, replaces population with $\ln(\text{population})$, and includes a dummy for Belgrade, a +0.4 shift in representational bias corresponds to $\approx €767\text{k}$ in subsidies ($0.4 \times 1\,918.29$; 95% CI $\approx €712\text{k}-€823\text{k}$) and $\approx €430\text{k}$ in the budget balance ($0.4 \times 1\,074.22$; 95% CI $\approx €375\text{k}-€484\text{k}$), with year fixed effects and the standard controls included.

CONCLUSIONS

This study employs parliamentary representational bias as an independent mechanism through which political influence can shape local fiscal outcomes. Drawing on data from 145 Serbian municipalities spanning 2013–2023, it demonstrates that legislative representation (rather than executive-level alignment) serves as a key driver of selective fiscal favoritism in a closed-list PR system governed by a centralised hybrid regime. By distinguishing between formula-based and discretionary fiscal transfers, the analysis underscores how representational leverage can effectively replace direct partisan control as a channel for distributing public resources.

The research explores whether local representation in the national parliament and partisan congruence between local and central authorities affect municipal fiscal outcomes within the framework of pork barrel politics. The evidence supports the first hypothesis (H1): parliamentary over-representation correlates positively with higher central subsidies and more favorable budget balances. Conversely, the second hypothesis (H2), which anticipated fiscal benefits stemming from local and national partisan alignment, finds no empirical support, a result that may appear unexpected given Serbia's highly centralised and semi-authoritarian context.

For transfers per capita, results align closely with the expectations of a rules-governed allocation system. Structural and demographic variables, such as statutory development group, the share of elderly residents, and dependence on social assistance, all exert consistent and significant effects, while neither representational bias nor partisan alignment proves influential. This suggests that formula-based transfers predominantly reflect long-term developmental and demographic needs rather than short-term political strategies.

In contrast, discretionary subsidies reveal a clear political dimension. Representational bias emerges as strong, stable, and substantively significant: municipalities enjoying higher levels of parliamentary representation receive disproportionately larger subsidies. These relationships persist even after controlling for population size, development classification, and mayoral alignment, indicating that parliamentary over-representation operates as a channel for discretionary fiscal steering in Serbia's centralised institutional setting. Likewise, the budget balance functions as a politically responsive indicator, with municipalities with greater representation consistently achieving more favorable fiscal outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic context or local executive partisanship. Overall, the evidence shows that while rule-based fiscal flows remain largely shielded from political interference, discretionary indicators exhibit a clear bias linked to parliamentary (over) representation.

The absence of local partisan favoritism is particularly intriguing, as it challenges the common expectation that co-partisanship between local and national executives drives fiscal advantages. This suggests that in centralised

hybrid regimes, control over distributive resources may bypass local actors altogether, concentrating instead within national-level parliamentary and party structures – a dynamic that future research could explore further to determine whether this centralization of fiscal influence and disregard of local partisanship is typical of similar regime contexts.

Two main limitations should be acknowledged. First, variation in partisan alignment within municipalities declines sharply after 2016, reducing the capacity to identify its independent effects and thereby emphasizing the role of parliamentary representation – especially in the period of heightened autocratization. Second, in a closed-list PR environment, representation may not be fully exogenous: party elites often assign winnable list positions with geographic considerations in mind, potentially linking representational bias to strategic electoral decisions. Moreover, factors such as urbanization and municipal scale may blur the distinction between structural and political determinants, while the single-country design limits the generalizability of findings beyond the Serbian context.

Thus, future research should also examine this representational mechanism in other countries with similar institutional arrangements, particularly those employing electoral systems that discourage personal vote cultivation, and also in hybrid or semi-democratic regimes more broadly. Comparative work could illuminate how institutional centralization and local autonomy condition fiscal favoritism, while sectoral or project-level analyses might uncover whether political bias is concentrated in specific areas of expenditure which are more susceptible to partisan influence. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how distributive politics operates under varying regime types and institutional constraints.

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NOVAC IDE KUĆI? POLITIKA TERITORIJALNE RASPODELE BUDŽETSKIH SREDSTAVA U PROPORCIONALNOM SISTEMU SA ZATVORENIM LISTAMA

APSTRAKT

Srbija primenjuje jedan od najrigidnijih izbornih sistema u Evropi: proporcionalni izborni sistem sa zatvorenim listama u okviru jedne izborne jedinice. Ovaj sistem karakteriše potpuna depersonalizacija, budući da reizbor kandidata zavisi od njihovog mesta na listama koje kontrolišu stranački lideri, a ne od podrške birača. Uprkos tome što ovakav sistem ne podstiče kandidate da grade ličnu podršku birača, početna istraživanja ukazuju na iznenađujuću povezanost između teritorijalne zastupljenosti u Narodnoj skupštini i obrazaca raspodele resursa lokalnim jedinicama vlasti. Ovo istraživanje analizira odnos između prebivališta narodnih poslanika i finansijskih transfera sa nacionalnog nivoa, uključujući subvencije, rashode lokalnih budžeta, kao i budžetske suficite i deficite na lokalnom nivou, i ispituje uticaj nacionalne zastupljenosti na lokalnu fiskalnu dinamiku. U analizu su uključene kontrolne varijable, poput veličine populacije, nivoa razvijenosti, stope nezaposlenosti, starosne strukture i oslanjanja na socijalnu zaštitu. Korišćeni su podaci za 145 opština u Srbiji u periodu od 2013. do 2023. godine. Prvi nalazi ukazuju na to da politika teritorijalne raspodele budžetskih sredstava opstaje čak i u izbornom sistemu koji destimuliše izgradnju lične biračke podrške, pri čemu prvenstveno koristi imaju teritorijalne jedinice sa većom zastupljenošću kroz subvencije i finansiranje projekata. Istraživanje dalje ispituje ulogu političke usklađenosti između lokalne i nacionalne vlasti, naročito nakon lokalnih izbora 2016. godine,

koji su u mnogim opštinama doveli do objedinjavanja političke moći na oba nivoa, što je karakteristično za centralizovane hibridne režime, poput Srbije u posmatranom periodu. Ova usklađenost analizira se kao potencijalni pokretač političkog favorizovanja određenih lokalnih samouprava u teritorijalnoj raspodeli budžetskih sredstava.

KLJUČNE REČI: teritorijalna raspodela budžetskih sredstava, javna potrošnja, teritorijalna zastupljenost, proporcionalni izborni sistem sa zatvorenim listama, teritorijalna reprezentacija, Narodna skupština Srbije