

# POLITICO

## You and your neighbor's pork

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The unspoken rule on Capitol Hill is, “Don’t criticize my pork; I won’t criticize yours.” But regardless of how one feels about earmarks, lawmakers should pay closer attention to their colleagues’ projects — because this pork isn’t getting distributed equally. Vast regions of the nation are getting the short end of the stick.

Earmark advocates love to brag about their newest project and are pretty good at making constituents believe they’re particularly adept at this practice. However, most members of Congress are bringing home such a small piece of the earmark pie that their constituents would be far better off if they never sent their tax dollars to Washington in the first place.

Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia are “earmark donor states.” Their citizens receive only a small percentage of earmarks relative to the share of taxes they send to Washington. Yet 90 percent of the U.S. population lives in these donor states.

Colorado taxpayers, for example, contribute about 1.6 percent of federal taxes, but they receive only slightly more than 0.2 percent of earmarked funds — proportionally speaking, less than a third of what the state should be getting. This works out to more than \$200 million that Coloradans are spending to subsidize earmarks in other states. Hardly chump change.

So while Colorado’s representatives might pat themselves on the back for securing funding for an occasional municipal bus or bioenergy plant, their earmarking rivals in states like West Virginia and Hawaii obtain funds for larger, more expensive projects — then send the bill to the Centennial State.

Colorado is but one of dozens of egregious examples. Minnesota receives roughly 40 percent of what it proportionally should, subsidizing more than \$340 million in other states’ earmarks. Based on its share of federal taxes paid, North Carolina should receive an additional \$250 million worth of earmarks. California is shortchanged by more than \$1.2 billion, relative to its contribution.

Meanwhile, the 16 “earmark beneficiary” states are living well on the largesse of their fellow citizens. West Virginia and Mississippi benefit the most from the earmarking process — pulling in more than six and 11 times the earmark funds they should, respectively. Alaska and Hawaii aren’t far behind.

There’s little question why these states were on top of the pile in the last Congress. They had powerful operators like Sens. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) and Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) throwing weight around on their behalf.

Perhaps these interstate earmark subsidies might be tolerable if the funds were dedicated to essential projects. But the waste and abuse inherent in the process are a well-told story. Bridges to nowhere, teapot museums and legume research are egregious wastes of federal funds. They are even more offensive if, like most Americans, you live in an earmark

donor state and are sending your tax dollars out of state to subsidize these projects.

Of course, many earmark proponents dispute the notion that the federal government should distribute funds to the states in a proportional fashion. They argue that federal funds should be directed to poorer states — where they are needed most.

In practice, this isn't always the case. Wealthier states like Utah, Vermont and Nevada are all earmark beneficiaries at the expense of poorer donor states like Georgia, Tennessee and Arkansas. [The data](#) reveal a weaker than expected correlation between a state's median income and its earmark subsidization figure.

On the other hand, the data show a relatively stronger correlation between a state's earmarks and its representation on the appropriations committees — where earmarks are born and bred. This suggests that when it comes to earmarking, a state's wealth matters much less than its political clout.

Several decades ago, members of Congress realized that the political process does not lend itself well to the equitable distribution of federal transportation dollars. So they instituted funding formulas for transportation spending in the mid-1950s.

While transportation spending is a mess in many ways, the formulas ensure at least a nod toward funding equity — guaranteeing that each state gets back at least 92 percent of the transportation money it sends to Washington. No such formula exists for earmarks, and this is a major reason for the huge discrepancy between earmark donor and recipient states.

But there's a broader lesson: When Congress is in charge of funding state and local projects, politics will always win out and many states will be shortchanged. If these projects are needed at all, they are better handled at the state and local level, where fewer distributional inequities are likely to occur.

Are members from earmark donor states unaware of these massive inequities? Or are they just willing to let their constituents disproportionately subsidize out-of-state projects?

The answer is unclear.

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