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Understanding State Government Appropriations for the Arts: 1976-1999

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Abstract

Using panel data analysis, we examine the relative importance of citizen and government characteristics on a highly discretionary and volatile budget item: state appropriations to arts agencies. Despite the unimportance of arts spending to most citizens, changes in arts spending appear to reflect citizen desires. Spending rises with per capita income, state revenues, and citizen political and social liberalism, but characteristics of state legislatures do not significantly affect spending.

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Do the desires of citizens or politicians have more impact on public spending on the arts? At the federal level, arts policy appears to reflect the agendas of political elites rather than public demands. Democrats founded the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) largely as a tribute to John F. Kennedy and expanded its funding much more rapidly than the federal budget for fifteen years. Republicans stopped increasing its budget in the 1980s, and cut it in half after the Republican Revolution of 1994. The minimal changes in public opinion over this period cannot explain these patterns, and the only major public outcry over the NEA – the 1989-90 controversy over whether it was funding indecent, blasphemous art – had minimal impact on its budget (DiMaggio and Pettit 1999, Lewis 2006).

State arts spending is more interesting than the frequently studied NEA. State arts agencies jointly spend substantially more than the NEA (Schuster 2002); in 2006, for instance, states appropriated \$327.5 million for the arts, more than double the NEA budget. State spending also varies dramatically. In 2006, per capita appropriations ranged from \$0.06 in California to \$5.36 in Hawaii (NASAA, 2006). It is also more volatile within states: aggregate appropriations have also dropped by one-third in nominal dollars since 2001, with cuts of 90 percent in California and three-quarters in Florida in 2003 alone (Kinzer, 2004). Public opinion may have more impact on policy at the state than federal level (Norrander 2000), though the low salience of arts spending suggests a limited role here. The entirely discretionary nature of arts spending also presents an interesting contrast to most models of state spending.

Using 24 years of state legislative appropriations, we perform a panel data analysis to examine the forces driving state spending on the arts. After a brief history of state arts agencies and a review of previous research on support for public arts spending, we examine the impact of state revenues, per capita income, citizen political and social liberalism, government liberalism, and divided government. Only the first three have significant effects, though we also demonstrate clear patterns over time and across states.

State Spending on the Arts

When the NEA was founded in 1965, only seven states had arts councils. Largely because the NEA began giving states with arts agencies money to subsidize the arts, all states had them within a few years (Hofferbert and Urice, 1985; Mulcahy, 2002; Lowell, 2004). The importance of NEA grants to the states has dwindled. It currently awards \$200,000 annually to each state, with additional funds granted on a per capita basis and through Regional Partnership Agreements and National Services awards, but aggregate spending by arts agencies surpassed the total NEA budget in 1985 (DiMaggio, 1991: 223). States still spend more than twice as much as the NEA, despite many states' dramatic cuts in arts funding since 2001.

About half the states have independent arts agencies; the remainder put them in departments of culture, economic development, state, or education or in the governor's office (Mulcahy, 2002). State arts agencies and the NEA spend their budgets similarly: "both are primarily oriented to assisting professional arts organizations; both devote small proportions of their budgets to direct grants to artists; the states spend a little

more on amateur and community oriented activities and, perhaps, a little less on the largest producing organizations; and the Endowment and the states allocate funds among disciplines in very similar ways” (DiMaggio, 1991: 242).

Although collectively larger than the NEA, state arts agencies spend only about \$1 per capita, on average. In such a “small-scale” environment (Hofferbert and Urice, 1985), especially given the entirely discretionary nature of this spending, the arts councils survive by building support from their political constituencies, making small grants to many arts organizations. According to Barsdate (2001: 3), “states that have achieved significant cultural policy goals [have struck] an accord among the state’s most diverse arts constituencies: professional vs. amateur, large vs. small, urban vs. rural, emerging vs. established, etc. Polarity between these groups can undermine popular support for new cultural policy initiatives unless all of the stakeholders perceive the policy to advance a distribution system that benefits them all.” In response to arts agencies’ strategies of spreading their funds as widely as possible, larger and more established arts organizations have successfully lobbied state governments directly for their own line-item funding (Urice, 1992).

Explaining State Spending on the Arts

State policies strongly reflect the ideologies and beliefs of the state’s citizens in a wide variety of fields (e.g., Nice 1983; Wright, Erickson and McIver 1985, 1987; Erickson, Wright and McIver 1993, Norrander 2000). Nice (1983) showed strong correlations between McGovern’s share of a state’s 1972 Presidential vote and its state-local tax effort, welfare and education expenditures, and consumer expenditure. The

Wright et al. (1985) and Erikson et al. (1993) measures of state liberalism have yielded a variety of findings: “We know that the ideology of states’ residents is reflected in general policy liberalism ... and such specific policies as rape laws ..., alcohol and drug statutes ..., balanced budget acts ..., economic development ..., welfare policies ..., and death penalty practices and reforms” (Norrander 2000, 771-72; *citations deleted*). More recently, scholars have demonstrated connections between state policy and state-level measures of more specific public opinion (e.g., on the death penalty (Mooney and Lee 2000, Norrander 2000), on abortion (Norrander and Wilcox 1999), and on political tolerance, homosexuality, welfare spending, and environmental spending (Brace, Sims-Butler, Arceneaux, and Johnson 2002, Lewis 2003)).

This may not hold true for arts spending, however. Legislatures are most responsive when issues are “easy” – require no expertise – and politically salient (Gormley 1986; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Haider-Markel and Meier 1996) and when legislative action is highly visible (Burstein, Bauldry and Froeses 2001). Public spending on the arts is not salient even to arts supporters (DiMaggio and Pettit 1999). Most voters have no idea how much their states spend on the arts and wouldn’t know how to participate in the debate over arts spending if they knew it was occurring. This would seem to allow legislatures to vote their own political philosophies without worrying about the public’s response. The changing agenda of Congress appears to have driven the dramatic rises and falls in the NEA’s fortunes; public opinion barely changed (DiMaggio and Pettit 1999, Lewis 2006).

Most Americans appear to favor some public funding of the arts (Filicko 1996). Based on thirteen public opinion surveys, Pettit and DiMaggio (1998) find that a small

majority supports public funding and prefers local over state over federal funding, but that few want to *increase* spending. That majority owes much to politically and socially liberal voters and arts lovers. The political liberalism shows up in a variety of ways. DiMaggio and Pettit (1999) find that support for arts funding is associated with belief in an active role for government in the economy and that “strong Republicans” are more likely than others to favor cuts. Brooks (2001, 2004) finds support rising with liberalism. Lewis and Brooks (2005) find that artists, their audiences, and their donors are all more politically liberal than the general population. Lewis (2006) finds that attitudes toward domestic spending (on the environment, health, police and law enforcement, education, and retirement and unemployment benefits) are the strongest predictors of support for public arts spending, but that liberalism and Democratic Party identification have additional impacts. Using data from a referendum in metropolitan Detroit on a property tax increase earmarked for the arts, Rushton (2005) finds the percentage in a precinct voting for the Democrat for governor was the strongest predictor of the percentage voting for the referendum.

Social liberalism also drives public support for arts spending. Artists, patrons, and donors are all less religious (especially less fundamentalist) and more politically tolerant, more sexually permissive, and more likely to favor legal abortions and marijuana sales than the general population (Lewis and Brooks 2005). Approval of homosexual and extramarital relations and support for civil liberties for unpopular minorities are important predictors of support for public spending on the arts, even after controlling for political liberalism and personal characteristics (Lewis 2006).

DiMaggio and Pettit (1999), Brooks (2001, 2004), and Rushton (2005) all find that education but not income influences support for arts spending. Lewis (2006) takes education as an indicator of a taste for the arts. He also finds support is higher for women, the single and divorced, and city-dwellers than for men, married people, and those in more rural areas: the former are all more likely to attend the arts than the latter (Heilbrun and Gray 2001, Throsby 1994).

The low salience and visibility of state arts spending suggests that politicians' values, rather than those of their constituents, may determine spending outcomes. At the federal level, a bipartisan coalition created the NEA and rapidly increased its funding in its early years, but the opposition came primarily from Republicans and conservative Democrats. Opponents have made several arguments: (1) spending on the arts is a luxury that is wasteful in tough budget times; (2) the private market, not government, should decide how valuable works of art are; and (3) special interest groups too easily capture arts bureaucracies, leading them to fund art repugnant to the general population (Rushton 2003). The first argument drove the debate in the NEA's early years (Moen 1997). President Reagan achieved the first nominal dollars cut in the NEA budget in 1982, based on objections to "the general principle of government support for the arts" (Cummings 1991, 57) and to "the rising Federal budget deficit" (National Endowment for the Arts 2000, 34). In a later, serious challenge to the NEA's existence, critics charged it with funding blasphemous, indecent art after NEA money went to Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and to the traveling retrospective *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* in 1989, and 1995 saw a sharp cut in the NEA budget when the Republicans took control

of Congress (Brenson 2001; also see Alexander 2000 for a personal account from the Chair of the NEA at the time).

Democrats are more likely to argue that the arts produce positive externalities in consumption or production or by leaving an important legacy for future generations (Frey, 2000; Throsby, 2001). They are also more likely to argue that arts activity boosts economic growth and the local tax base by generating ideas that spill over into other creative sectors in the economy and by attracting new businesses or young, mobile, highly-educated creative workers (Florida 2002). Democrats are also more likely to justify public funding on equity grounds, arguing that poverty, geography, or lack of parental interest will limit some groups' access to experiences with the arts that constitute part of the foundation of a fulfilling life (e.g., Baumol 1997).

Parties may take more strategic positions when they compete for control of state government. Fiorina (1991) notes the increasing incidence of divided government in US states – when the governor's party does not have a majority in both houses. Divided governments tend to spend more than unified Republican governments and less than unified Democratic governments, but somewhat closer to the Democrats' preferred level (Alt and Lowry 1994, 2000). Poterba (1994, 817-8) argues that unified governments adjust better to unexpected budget deficits, partly due to “the lower costs of reaching political consensus in single-party states” and partly due to the political vulnerability of governors and legislators, making them more “reluctant to take unpopular actions, such as raising taxes or cutting spending.” Similarly, Persson, Roland and Tabellini (1997; 2000) find that parliamentary systems, which are very unified governments, tend to spend more than presidential systems, but target that spending better to public goods

rather than special-interest transfers (see Rushton 2002 for an example in the arts context). If governments fund the arts primarily due to its benefits to society generally, unified governments should spend more on the arts. If arts spending primarily subsidizes influential interest groups, divided governments should deliver more funding.

Data and Method

We run a fixed-effects panel data analysis on state spending on the arts from 1976 through 1999. Our dependent variable is the natural logarithm of per capita state appropriations to arts agencies and line-item grants to arts organizations, expressed in constant dollars (NASAA, 2001). Using the natural logarithm allows the independent variables to have constant proportional, rather than dollar, effects. Thus, coefficients on state dummy variables will indicate proportional differences in spending, and coefficients on state per capita income and government revenues (also measured as natural logarithms) will be elasticities.

We measure citizen desires in several ways. First, we measure political liberalism using the Berry et. al. (1998, 2004) state-level measures of citizen liberalism. This variable, widely used in the study of state politics, combines the ideologies of the state's members of Congress and of their (defeated) opponents, weighting them by their share of the vote in the most recent election. The scale has a theoretical range from 0 to 100. Second, we use the Lewis (2003) state-level measure of acceptance of homosexuality, which combines data from three series of public opinion surveys on homosexual sex (whether it is always wrong, whether it should be illegal, and whether it may have called down God's punishment in the form of AIDS). The measure is an estimate of the

percentage of state residents in each year who would say that “sexual relations between two people of the same sex” are not “always wrong.” The mean is 45, with a range from 21 to 84. Third, we use per capita income and the percentage of the population over 25 with at least a bachelor’s degree as indicators of the state’s demand and ability to pay for the arts.

We measure the characteristics of state governments in a variety of ways. First, per capita state government revenues indicate the resources available to government. The tighter the constraints on government spending, the more weight will be given to the claim that the arts are a wasteful luxury. Second, we measure the political liberalism of the state legislature and governor using the Berry et. al. (1998, 2004) measure of government liberalism, also widely used in state politics research. Third, we use a dummy variable for divided government, coded 1 if a party different from the governor controlled at least one house of the legislature. The expected impact of divided government depends on whether the arts are more of a true public good (in which case divided government would have a negative effect on the arts) or more of a private good subsidized by the state (in which case divided government would have a positive effect). In a sensitivity analysis, we used six dummy variables to indicate all types of unified or divided government (e.g., a unified Republican government, a Republican governor with one house held by Democrats, or a Republican governor with both houses held by Democrats) with no meaningful difference in findings. Fourth, as an alternative measure of the strength of the state’s economy and of competing demands for state government resources, we include the state’s unemployment rate.

We run a fixed-effects model to control for unobserved factors that could otherwise bias our findings. We include dummy variables for each state to capture unmeasured time-constant characteristics that influence the state's arts funding (e.g., its history and political culture). We also include dummy variables for each year to capture changes over time at the national level that affect all states (e.g., the health of the national economy). These dummy variables explain 78 percent of the variation in per capita arts spending by themselves, leaving little for the more interesting independent variables to explain. Further, fixed effects models pay for their unbiasedness through multicollinearity that inflates standard errors: at least 90 percent of the variation in most of the independent variables in this regression can be explained by the remaining independent variables, making it more difficult for regression coefficients to achieve statistical significance.

Results

Per capita state revenue and per capita income are the most important predictors of per capita spending on the arts (Table 1). As these variables are natural logarithms, the coefficients indicate elasticities of approximately 1. As either per capita revenue or per capita income rises by 1 percent, holding the other constant, per capita state spending on the arts is expected to rise by about 1 percent. In addition, as citizen liberalism rises by one percentage point, expected arts spending rises 0.6 percent, and a one point rise in our measure of acceptance of homosexuality is associated with a 2.2 percent increase in arts spending.

[Table 1 near here].

Somewhat surprisingly, the education coefficient is insignificant, despite previous research (done primarily with individual-level data) that education matters more than income in support for public spending on the arts (Brooks 2001, 2004; Rushton 2005). Multicollinearity does not seem to be the explanation: the education coefficient remains insignificant even if we drop per capita income and revenues or run cross-sectional analyses without the state and year dummy variables (in regressions for a selection of years with education as the only independent variable, its coefficient tended to be positive and significant, but it lost its significance when we added citizen liberalism as an explanatory variable).

Government liberalism and divided government do not have a significant impact on arts spending. The situation in the state legislature is not as important as we expected.

Figure 1 maps relative spending by states, holding the other variables constant, showing which states had a significantly positive, or negative, fixed effects. States in the West and in New England spent less than the explanatory variables would predict, but otherwise geographic patterns were not clear.

[Figure 1 near here]

Figure 2 shows the estimated fixed effects by year, again holding the other variables constant. The year coefficients demonstrate rapid increases in arts spending in the first five years of the series, with spending in 1980 three-quarters higher than in 1976. From 1980 through 1990, spending increased slowly, with a jump in 1990, when spending was double that in 1976. Since 1990, however, real per capita spending has dropped steadily; by 1999 it dropped below the 1976 level.

[Figure 2 near here]

Conclusion

State government funding for the arts depends more on economic conditions and the political attitudes of its citizens than on the ideology of its legislators or on whether its government is divided. States in healthy financial positions with high-income, liberal populations spend more on the arts. The importance of state revenues suggests that the arts are part of a larger package of services bigger governments provide to their citizens. The near-unitary elasticity indicates that arts spending rises in proportion to general spending. Although the arts took big hits as Florida and California dealt with fiscal crises in 2004, states do not typically view the arts as luxuries that expand or contract faster than the budget as a whole. Bigger government leads to more arts spending, but the nearly equal coefficient on per capita income; the significant coefficient on citizen, but not government, liberalism; and the significant coefficient on acceptance of homosexuality suggest that citizen desires and values matter more than those of politicians in arts spending. This apparent responsiveness to citizen desires occurs even though arts budgets are small, not particularly visible, and not particularly salient.

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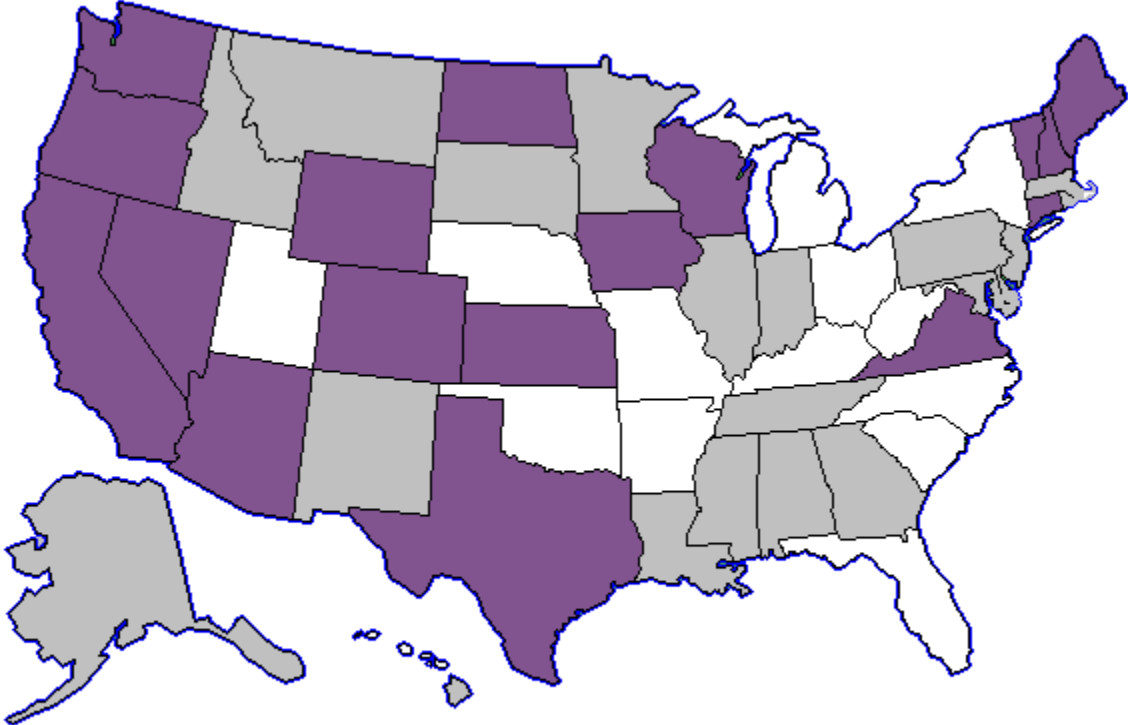
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Table 1. Fixed-Effects Model for Natural Logarithm of Per Capita State Arts Spending, 1975 Dollars

Per capita income (logged constant dollars)	1.185** (3.65)
Per capita state revenue (logged constant dollars)	1.060** (4.59)
Citizen liberalism	0.552* (2.39)
Approval of homosexuality	2.240* (2.02)
Proportion of adults (25+) with bachelor's degree	-1.089 (0.90)
Government liberalism	-0.001 (0.01)
Divided government	0.020 (0.74)
Unemployment rate	-1.448 (1.27)
Observations	1199
R ²	0.80

Robust t statistics in parentheses: * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Model also includes dummy variables for states and years

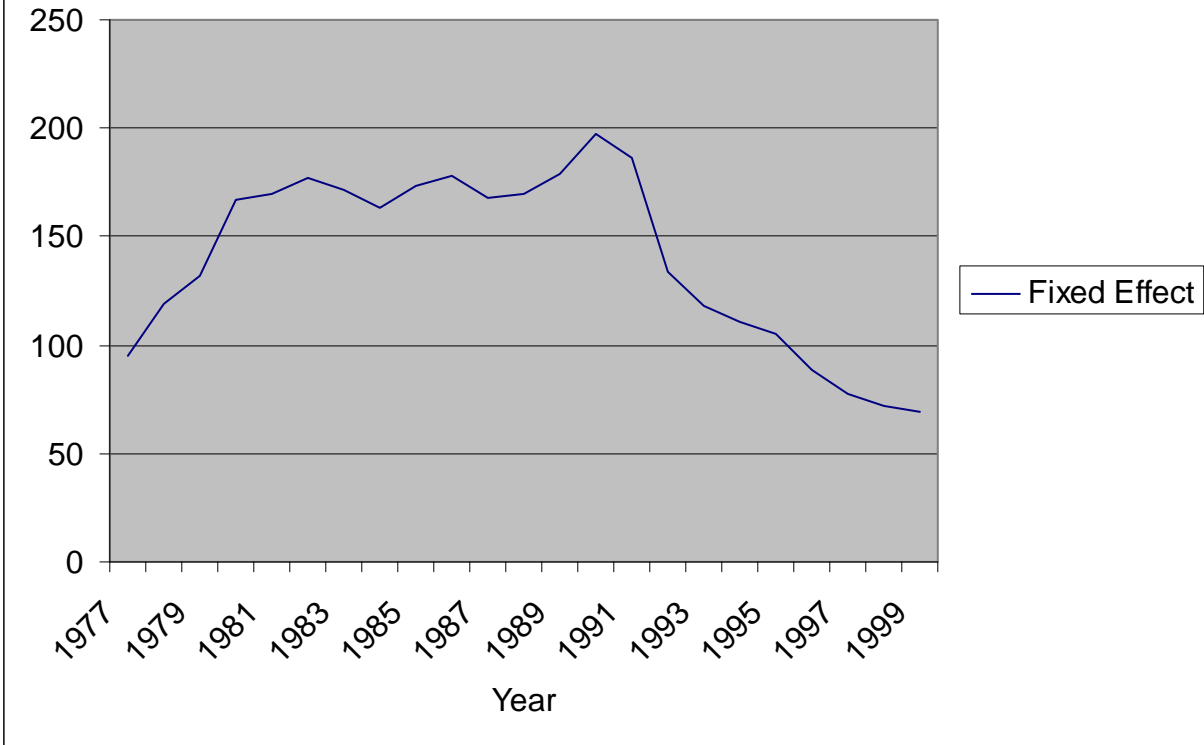
Figure 1: Estimated Fixed Effects for State Arts Spending by State



	Negative at 5% level of significance
	No significant fixed effect
	Positive at 5% level of significance

Note: Pennsylvania is the default.

Figure 2: Estimated Fixed Effects for State Arts Spending by Year:
1977-1999



Note: 1976 = 100.