

## On Pork Barrel Spending: Incorporating Political Bargaining Mechanisms in Subsidy Legislation

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**Abstract:** The distribution of governmental grants towards municipalities is generally assumed to be driven by efficiency and equity considerations. Empirical research on pork barrel politics however often indicates that public funding is allocated strategically to municipalities where ministers or representatives live or are ruled by fellow partisans. Although the statistical evidence is large, the literature overlooks the regulatory context in which these budgetary decisions are taken. The scarce academic contributions that cover subsidy or grant program legislation mainly focus on the absence of codes of good governance or anti-corruption measures. In this study we contribute to the literature by studying whether ministers indeed have discretionary power to send the pork home and reveal the mechanisms embedded in the regulation that allows them to do so. This study investigates the regulated decision making process of 8 different project subsidies that the Flemish Government (Belgium) grants to municipalities. The visibility of the subsidies determined the choice of the subsidies, as politicians might expect a more rewarding attitude amongst voters if they can clearly distinguish the project's outcomes. Consequently, the focus is on subsidies for sports infrastructure, sustainable mobility public space grants, forestation projects, digitalization, youth houses, elderly residential care centre, dilapidated retail buildings and cultural infrastructure. The case studies provide indications that even when strictly applying the proscribed procedures, there is room for partisan behaviour given the following types of political bargaining mechanisms: tailoring subsidy calls, adapting scoring formulas, changing the weight of granting parameters, delegating decision making power and installing administrative supervisory power.

**Keywords:** Pork Barrel Politics; Intergovernmental Grants; Distributive Spending Regulatory Politics; Subsidy Legislation.

## **Introduction**

The distribution of governmental grants towards municipalities is generally assumed to be driven by efficiency and equity considerations. If one follows this normative frame of reference, which is ascribed to fiscal federalism theory, government intervention in the form of discretionary subsidy grants to municipalities can be expected to be done in compliance with well-defined legal standards (Oates, 1999; Tresch, 2014). This viewpoint stands in stark contrast with empirical studies on ‘pork barreling’ that show overt political meddling in the allocation of public resources (e.g., Evans, 2004; Robertson, 2008). An extensive and distinguished body of scholarship focuses on the phenomenon how legislators are passing bills and take budgetary decisions that provide benefits for their constituents (Golden & Min, 2013; Stokes et. al. 2013). Many of these pork barrel studies indicate public funding to be allocated strategically to municipalities where ministers or representatives live or are ruled by fellow partisans. Theoretically it is considered that politicians seek distributive benefits for their voting districts in order to get reelected (e.g. Braidwood, 2015; Sidman, 2019). This putative political attitude is seen as problematic because it potentially thwarts the policy objectives for which the discretionary grant programs are designed. One of the key lessons on pork barrel politics therefore is that discretionary grants are inherently delicate since they offer the opportunity, means and incentives for political interference (Evans, 2011).

Although the statistical evidence on pork barreling is large, literature overlooks the specific regulatory context in which these budgetary decisions are taken. It should be stressed that the scarce academic contributions that cover cases of subsidy or grants program legislation mainly focus on the absence of codes of good governance and preventive measures (e.g. Blanco, 2017; Connolly, 2020). The very fact of ministerial discretion is somewhat regarded as an ontological part of public granting programs

without questioning whether ministers actually have discretionary power to send the pork home. Consequently little research has been done to examine the mechanisms that are embedded in regulation that allows ministers to use their supposedly discretionary power for distributive purposes. Academic work on this subject seems to have overlooked that regulation, i.e. subsidy legislation, can be studied as a distinct form of politics that entails identifiable forms and patterns leading to distribution and redistribution (Levi-Faur, 2011). This knowledge gap in academic literature is remarkable because the interplay of law and politics is endemic to modern public administration. Law cannot be separated from politics inasmuch as the entire policy-making and budgetary process is carried with law, both procedural and substantial (Burke & Barnes, 2018).

In this study we contribute to the literature by using a regulatory politics framework to examine how the concept of ministerial discretion takes form in different subsidy granting programs. We have conducted eight case studies in which we have investigated the regulated decision making process of discretionary granting programs designed by the Flemish government (Belgium) with municipalities as targeted recipients. The first section of the paper contains the theoretical framework capturing pork barrel spending and ministerial discretion. After thoroughly explaining both concepts and clarifying the institutional differences between the American setting, the academic cradle of pork barrel studies, and European budgetary decision making processes, the second section makes the reader acquainted with our research outline, methodological approach and systematic case-selection. The third section offers our in depth analysis of the granting programs legislation. We structure our analysis by describing the similarities and differences we have found. Furthermore we assemble an analytical model that allows us to answer schematically how much discretionary power ministers have and in which form discretion is embedded in the program. We have structured the grants process in different

components which allowed us to determine which actor holds discretionary power (cabinet, minister or administration) and find out how the balance of power between these actors is formally set out. Before concluding, the fourth section subsequently contains the discussion about our results and proposes different pathways for further academic research.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

### *1.1. The Concept of Pork Barrel Spending*

The distribution of governmental resources across local jurisdictions is a fundamental function of modern public finance. Such transfers are theoretically justified on normative grounds, but an expanding body of literature shows that these allocations are often driven by political determinants. More specifically scholars point at the phenomenon of “pork barrel politics”, a derogatory coined term referring to public spending behaviour of politicians intended to benefit constituents or fellow partisans in return for electoral support (Robertson, 2008).

Pork barrel is anything but a new concept (Evans, 2011). Notably in American academia it is a laboriously studied theme for decades (Evans, 2004; Beckers et.al. 2017; Gordon & Simpson, 2018). Congressional politics is historically chronicled as a pork-barrel system that debauches certain appropriation bills by “*the forces of personal ambition and provincialism, aided and abetted by an unmethodical and irresponsible scheme of financial procedure*” (Maxey, 1919, 704). Pork barrel spending in congress today differs from the classical omnibus bills in size, scope and process, but not in principle. What is considered today as pork barrel politics comes in the form of projects and programs that are administered through bureaucratic entities with funding typically coming through the

regular appropriation process and accompanied with assertive political “domestic assistance” (Sidman, 2019).

Although the work of American scholars on pork barrelling is insightful, it is difficult to translate these findings into applicable lessons for European public administration. US models assume a presidential mode of interaction between the executive and legislative branch of government, weak political party structures and a budget or granting decision-making process akin to the one in United States’ congress. They study a very specific form of bargaining between two arms of government which stands in contrast to the budgetary system of the Flemish government and many other European governments. We see three fundamental differences that require an alternative conceptual approach in studying pork barrel in European public administration.

First, the Flemish budget system does not authorise individual legislators to formally play an active role in allocating subsidies. There is no formal competition between members of parliament that can lead to an outbalanced distribution of grant money. In American congress pork barrel projects provided by subsidies to favoured districts are often added to the federal budget by members of the house committee on appropriations (Pasour, 2011). There is no such equivalent in the Flemish system. If legislators do play a role in the allocation process, it must be in more subtle ways, for example by means of lobbying efforts affecting the decision making process in the Flemish cabinet system. The key decision-making entity therefore is the ministerial cabinet (Moens, 2022).

Second, the allocation of US granting programs are part of the annual budget process and are formally set out in the budget papers to be authorized by congress. In contrast, the Flemish budget is based on higher level outcome reporting standards, meaning that within budget constraints ministerial departments have few limitations on the creation or allocation of government subsidies. Due to the higher reporting standards of the Flemish

budget the allocation of discretionary grants can be seen as less transparent, although it has to be said that Flemish government recently introduced by decree a subsidy register to disclose financial information s.a. discretionary grants programs for municipalities (Flemish Parliamentary Papers, 2021)

Third, the “discretionary” part of grant programs in the US are analysed as a homogenous bargaining process where the discretion lies in the ability to authorise the subsidy program and the level and the recipients of the funding. In Flanders, ministerial discretion is one of the possible features of grant programs that can be unveiled in different forms and is rather heterogeneous depending on the type of subsidy program (De Keuster, 2009). Consequently, research on pork barrel spending in the Flemish institutional setting needs at least partially to be focussed on ministerial involvement in the decision-making process by investigating how much discretionary power legislation allows them to have and how it is executed. We therefore have chosen to analyse ministerial discretion through the prism of regulatory politics framework.

## *1.2. Regulatory politics framework: in search of degrees of discretionary power in subsidy legislation*

In a plurality political system like the one in Flanders, holding political office is often about compromise, deals and trade-offs – deals that regularly demand each party to abide and tolerate what it believes to be a distributive benefit for the coalition partner(s) (Lancaster, 1986; Albanese et.al. 2019). Regulation, in contrast to the eye of the lay beholder, is about formalized standards and procedures that eliminate ambiguity when strictly applied. This opaque theoretical dichotomy does not withstand empirical practice of modern public administration where law and politics continuously interact, shape and frame decision-making (Silverstein, 2009). Whilst not seldomly presented as purely

technical, regulation processes are inherently political involving different ideas and interests leading to concealed battles for influence or legislative bargaining (Wilson, 1980; Baron & Ferejohn, 1989; Koop & Lodge, 2017).

Applied to pork barrel spending a noticeable feature is the extent to which officials, whether they be political or administrative, make decisions in compliance with the binding legal procedures, although it appears that decisions were made and power was exercised according to indistinct partisan considerations (Bernheim et.al. 2006; Connolly, 2020). The allocation process seems to be well regulated and complemented with normative standards and principles of good governance, but contains in variable ways wide margins of appreciation (Wood et.al. 2022). To a higher or lesser extent formal subsidy decision making is characterized by a practical, yet difficult notion to grasp: discretionary power.

Discretionary power is often described in terms of the authority to choose amongst alternative courses of action. *“So the paradigm of discretion is the power-holder faced with a choice between actions X, Y and Z; his discretion is said to be freedom of choice amongst these actions”* (Galligan, 1986, 7). Galligan deepens his definition of discretionary power by regarding the assumption that discretion does not merely consists in the authority to choose amongst different courses of action, but to choose amongst different courses of actions *for good reasons*. The deciding official’s freedom of choice is therefore limited by the relative presence or absence of guiding standards accompanying this reasoning process. Politicians and civil servants deciding about which municipalities will or will not receive subsidies, have to make certain assessments in creating, weighting or interpreting standards as a way of indicating why the choice was made (Suiter & O’Malley, 2014).

In this sense, discretionary power is a matter of degree ranging from the rather wide scope of codes of good governance to the narrow margins that are still open in applying clear legal standards. Within this framework virtually any decision-maker will have some discretion, but the question how much he has will depend on the degree of choice there is in applying, weighting or creating standards. Applied to pork barrel spending one might expect that all the questionable features of discretion – secrecy, inaccessibility, unfairness, arbitrariness – are made possible by the specific legislation of the grant programs (Harlow & Rawlings, 2009). Subsidy legislation that indeed leads to overt political intrusiveness and pork barrel spending can be classified under the wider umbrella of ‘fuzzy legality’, meaning that the granting programs are characterized by a degree of absence of law, are regulated under a sweeping delegation of power or by lopsided mandates, extra-statutory arrangements or dead-letter laws (Cohn, 2001). Such a regime indistinctively breaches subsidy’s rule of law because decisions on the allocation of granting programs should be based on certain stated criteria that are amenable to legal challenge and not by the discretionary political whim of any official (Bingham, 2011).



## 2. Research outline

To study ministerial discretion we follow a traditional approach in conceptualizing granting allocating mechanisms that assumes the clear sequence of stages through which public funding proceeds. In a normative form ministers have the discretionary power that enables them to establish grant programs and define selection criteria, but discretion does not allow them to be involved in choosing grant recipients (Wood et.al. 2022). Pork barrel studies on the contrary indicate that in many cases legislative discretionary spending is used to strengthen incumbent's chances of re-election and show the blurred lines between public projects and vote-buying behaviour, hence ministerial discretion must contain more components of the grants program (Bak, 2021).

We therefore pose two research questions:

- How much discretionary power do Flemish ministers have in subsidy legislation?
- What are the legislative mechanisms in Flemish subsidy regulation that make ministers use their discretionary power in order to distribute public funding to targeted constituencies?

By investigating subsidy legislation we want to gain insight into the formal decision-making process of the distribution of grants. It is by examining specific procedures more in depth that we can understand how politicians have regulated ministerial discretion. Given the large amount of subsidy legislation and the type of in depth content analysis we want to conduct we are confronted with certain methodological limitations typical for case study research. Finding specific parts of legislation that have been “pork-barreled” requires many hours of labour by academics or policy researchers because the case study method demands data collection of in-depth descriptive information that needs to be

interpreted and presented in a theoretical narrative format. That being mentioned, recent innovative methods, like using machine learning techniques to analyse earmarked legislation on a larger scale, are scientifically promising but too premature to draw sound conclusions (Green, 2022).

### *2.1. Research method: case study*

We propose a case study research method in which we define the notion of case as a delimited phenomenon of theoretical significance that an argument attempts to describe or explain. In our study we attempt to explain the degree of discretionary power in subsidy legislation that might lead to pork-barrel spending which means that our cases are comprised of different subsidy legislation and their regulatory frameworks (Gerring, 2017). More specifically our cases contain the legislation of conditional intergovernmental grants. This type of grants are based on the interrelated choices of the national or regional government deciding whether to offer the grant, under which conditions and spending levels and the decisions of municipal governments to apply for grant receipt (Volden, 2007). These grants have the same overarching decision making structure and therefore exemplify a common typical pattern. But, to paraphrase Albert Hirschman, for the immersion in the particular to be useful for the catching of anything general, we believe that the selection of critical cases is necessary because these cases have a strategic importance in relation to the general problem (Flyvbjerg, 2011). When looking for critical cases, i.e. subsidy legislation, it is prescribed to search for either least likely or most likely cases, that is cases to either irrefutably falsify or clearly confirm theoretical assumptions (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We have chosen the latter.

## 2.2. *Research setting: selected cases*

To obtain the clearest understanding of pork barrel spending in subsidy legislation we have chosen to include cases that exemplify grant programs that are typically stated to be more prone for political interference. The visibility of the subsidies determined the choice of the subsidies, as politicians might expect a more rewarding attitude amongst voters if they can clearly distinguish the project's outcomes. For politicians effectively claiming electoral credit amongst voters literature acknowledges different conditions that have to be fulfilled (Bickers et.al. 2007). First, politicians need to be able to persuade voters in a way that the pork was sent home due to the excellent work they delivered. (Golden & Min, 2013). Second, to influence voters results must be visible given the political news overload. Grant programs lacking of visibility is not likely to be an effective method of increasing re-election probabilities (Stein and Beckers, 1994; Klingensmith 2019). Third, pork-barrel projects do not affect voters equally because of electorate's varying priorities and levels of importance they attach to grants (Spáč, 2021).

A purposive sample of 8 cases was selected that take the above validation remarks into account. Every selected subsidy legislation regulates the allocation of grants with a high level of visibility and with a certain level of budgetary impact given the level of investment: subsidies for sports infrastructure, sustainable mobility public space grants, forestation projects, digitalization, youth playgrounds, healthcare projects, dilapidated retail buildings and cultural infrastructure. Taken these subsidies altogether they encompass a broad spectre of voters' interests and priorities.

### 3. Case study analysis

Subsidy legislation that regulates ministerial discretion in the allocation process of grants falls apart into four major components: the grants purpose, the financial resources and the level of funding, the decision-making process and the administrative supervision. Legislation might allow different components to be the decision subject of ministers' discretion, but in general will delegate certain formal subsidy duties to administration. The more components are left to ministers discretion, the higher the degree of discretionary power hence the potential susceptibility to pork-barrelling. Figure 1 illustrates the procedural lenses through which we have analysed the 8 cases.

| Component                  | Determine actor's decision-making power   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Policy purpose             | - Who defines the policy purpose of the program?  |
| Resources & funding level  | - Who determines the funding level of the grants?   |
| Decision-making process    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What type of assessment process is chosen and by whom?</li> <li>- Who chooses the (adjustable) selection criteria?</li> <li>- Who chooses the (adjustable) weighting formula?</li> <li>- Who composes the jury or assessment board?</li> </ul> |
| Administration supervision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who controls the decision-making process?</li> <li>- Can decisions be overruled by minister or by government?</li> </ul>   |

*Figure 1: Analytical components of discretionary grants process*

The following section will describe the 8 selected cases component by component. By reason of synthesis we will not recount the entire procedure in full detail, but select and discuss the specific mechanisms that regulate discretionary power. If certain mechanisms appear in more than one case we will discuss this in the first case and refer to the this explanation in the other cases. The grant programs will be presented in a descriptive format with the focus on potential pork barrel mechanisms. The theoretical implications will be discussed in the results section.

### 3.1. *Sports infrastructure grants*

The policy purpose of the sports infrastructure grants program is broadly defined in the decree for sports infrastructure and installs the financial support of sport infrastructure investments of municipalities or public entities insofar the infrastructure has a supralocal character. The criteria that have to be met to comply with the notion supralocal infrastructure are regulated by Flemish government in an executive order and gauged by the Flemish sports agency. The resources and funding level is determined by Flemish government as well. The basis criteria for municipal sports infrastructure to qualify for the grants program (e.g. energy efficiency norms, building permits allowance, public accessibility) are set by decree. The sports infrastructure grants program *prima facie* does not incorporate large ministerial discretion because two major components are regulated by cabinet.

Our assessment however changes when analyzing the discretionary power in determining the decision-making process. Although it is the Flemish government that decides the funding to be competitive, meaning funding based on a process of proposal selection where the recipients are chosen based on the merits of their application, the minister has the delegated competence to appoint the members of the evaluation committee. The only formal requirement for committee members to qualify is to have certain experience in sports infrastructure or sports policy. This appointment competence gives the minister the indirect discretionary power to interfere in the decision-making process. Although the regulation states that a certain expertise is required it does not withstand the ministers to choose partisan members to steer the evaluation committee which makes political interference possible.

Another mechanism in the legislation of the grant program is the direct possibility the minister has in adapting the weighting of the evaluation criteria. We see that the five evaluation criteria (infrastructure need, reach of potential participants, degree of participation in financing and exploitation, accessibility and level of innovation) are fixed, but are prone to divergent interpretations and, more importantly, can be adapted in the final weight importance of the evaluation. For example, the criterion ‘level of innovation’ normally counts for 15% of the final score, but the minister can change the weighting of the criteria in the merits evaluation formula up to 40% of the score. Furthermore, in the administrative supervision process the Flemish sports agency controls the conformity of the grants process and has advisory competency, but the minister can overrule the administrators’ advice for motivated reasons.

The sports infrastructure grants program is characterized by a large degree of ministerial discretion. Different mechanisms are incorporated that can lead to pork barreling. The minister indirectly has discretionary power over the decision-making outcome by the appointing expert officials or partisan members. He can also execute discretion in a direct manner by adapting the weighting of evaluation criteria and to overrule administration’s advice in the supervision process.

### 3.2. *Sustainable mobility: redesign public domain*

In Flemish public transport policy government introduced a grant program to stimulate sustainable mobility furniture in nodes of transport modes. The grants program is intended to redesign public space in order to promote public transportation and cycling and walking infrastructure. In contrast to the sports infrastructure program this granting process has a different lifecycle where

administration seems to have substantially more power. The policy purpose and the funding level is determined by the Flemish government. The type of decision-making process is also chosen by Flemish government, but does not encompass grand discretionary power. The grants program is issued on a first come first served basis where the funding scheme is administered by formal eligibility criteria. Completing a grant application however can take several months to years because the proposal needs to be submitted by a supralocal project steering committee, a decision-making organ within the supralocal mobility regions with an average composition of twenty local governments.

The composition of the project steering group is semi-fixed: there are always public officials appointed of the municipality and the Flemish department. However Flemish government can decide to enlarge the steering group and appoint new members representing government. The minister has the delegated power to do so as well. This is important because the project steering committee decides by unanimity. If one member is vetoing a project application a formal mediation process has to be initiated in the board of the supralocal mobility regions which can take months. By appointing public officials with a certain party affiliation the ministers can in an indirect manner strategically manoeuvre and blockade the decision-making process in project steering committees. By doing so the application of the preferred project steering committees can be retrieved.

Theoretically legislation thus has installed a blockading mechanism that can be used until all the funding has been allocated to preferential constituencies. We classify this mechanism as an indirect form of discretionary power than can be an effective pork barrel method. Drawing the parallel with American literature this is not

farfetched because vetoing and filibustering mechanisms are often used to delay the application process (Evans, 2004).

### 3.3. *Forestation projects*

For a long time being the Flemish government has initiated different types of grant programs in order to stimulate forestation projects. One of the key programs is the annual funding government provides for municipalities to buy and invest in land that can be afforested. Based on the first impression of the subsidy's legal framework little discretion is left to the minister of environment. Government has chosen the allocation type to be competitive and anchored the budget ceiling that can be spent. The evaluation is entirely left to the Flemish nature and forests agency, but the minister can clarify the criteria that are used to assess the merits of grant applications. This rather small adjustment in legislation does not seem to have grand implications on the decision-making process, but in reality it has because the criteria are broadly defined. Three criteria are mentioned in subsidy legislation: the location of the land in Flanders, the vision and natural management of the future forest and the level of citizen participation with a specific emphasis on the manner of communication.

The Flemish minister has the delegated power to formally elucidate how these criteria need to be understood based on the environmental and nature policy. Subsidy legislation in this sense instigates ministerial discretion to tailor the allocation formula by the means of the policy. We see that for example that the criterion 'location' is not expounded in terms of the environmental importance of the site, but in terms of minimal acreage (0,1 ha). By lowering the minimal surface more contenders can apply for grants. This can be seen as a form of shredded



subsidizing. A pork barrel explanation for this mechanism would be that the more projects that are funded, the more communicative opportunities the minister has to sway over potential voters.

Furthermore, we see that the formal evaluation process has been delegated to the agency. There seems to be a void in subsidy legislation because in contrast to the sports infrastructure program there are no formalized criteria to install an evaluation committee. The minister is responsible for the oversight and the functioning of the agency. In this case, which can be seen as the rule rather than the exception, the minister can indirectly appoint affiliated partisans for high-flying senior civil service positions to lead the grants programs. The level of discretion is thus indirect which means there must be a dialogue between the appointed official and the minister or cabinet for grants program to be pork-barrelled. To counterweight the argument it must be said that political appointees in the Belgian system are often seen as the best and brightest among Belgian political elites in general (Dierickx, 2004). This leads to the open questions to which degree these political appointed senior civil-servants are susceptible to political favours, how prevalent political values are in (independent) government bodies (Eriksen, 2021), if ideological orientation matters in the delegation of power (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016) and, comprehensively, how independent their decision-making processes are in practice (Fernández-i-Marín, Jordana & Bianculli, 2016).

### 3.4. *Digital City Hall*

The Flemish government has introduced a grant program called ‘digital city hall’ in order to digitize municipal administrative services. Main goal of the program is digital modernisation, tackling administrative burden and improve citizen service

because city halls' opening hours do not fit well with standard office hours. The policy purpose and funding level are determined by Flemish government, just as the type of granting program to be competitive. The assessment criteria are agreed upon within Flemish government. The Flemish minister for internal administration, local and provincial governments has the delegated power to announce the calls for the funding opportunities and compose the jury that will review and score the applications. In contrast to the sports infrastructure program no formal criteria are outlined to qualify as a member of a jury. The minister can appoint assessors within or outside government. Legislation thus installs a mechanism that can lead to indirect forms of pork-barrelling. The observed mechanism corresponds in a certain way with the theory of the power of the last word in legislative policy making: although many components of the grants program are discussed by the large decision making body that Flemish government and its cabinets is, the final proposer's preferences almost certainly prevail albeit in this case in an indirect manner via appointing members of the evaluation committee (Bernheim et.al. 2006).

This mechanism gets reinforced by the absence of a weighting formula. Whilst the sports infrastructure program had a weighting formula to score the different assessment criteria and give a final ranking, the digital city hall program is merely based on the deliberation process of jury board members. The criteria are very broadly formulated (e.g. level of innovation, added public value, level of cooperation) which might lead to bargaining within jury. Although members in principle have to be autonomous in their decisions or opinions, it is surprising that this prerequisite is formally recapitulated. In public procurement procedures this requirement needs to be formally implemented, otherwise the intervention of the

jury can questioned (Schoenmaekers, 2021), but this is not the case for the digital city hall grants program. We find this remarkable because the most important goal of the jury review process is to ensure objectivity. One way to reduce political lobbying is to regulate who may seat in the evaluation committee, but in this case the composition of the committee is entirely left to the ministerial discretion. Behind the veil of the evaluation process political influence may be exercised (Hedge, 2009). This raises the question how politicized the evaluation committees are in practice and needs a further in-depth inquiry.

### 3.5. *Youth houses*

The Flemish governments wants to enhance local youth organisations to modernize their youth houses by introducing a grants program for investments in playgrounds for children, youngsters and adolescents. The grants are intended for infrastructure enlargement, accessibility and energy efficiency investments. The policy purpose, resources and the decision-making process are regulated by Flemish government. The competent minister has little discretionary power. The type of funding is competitive, but the entire application process is governed by administration. In contrast with the other competitive grant programs even the composition of the evaluation committee is determined by the department. Each application is assessed and scored individually by two members of the committee. In the end of the evaluation process a delegation of the committee will make a ranking based on all the individual assessments and will formulate a well-motivated advice directed to the minister. The latter's final granting decision can diverge from the delegation's advice, but only if one manages to do so for sound and conclusive reasons. There might occur indirect forms of pork barreling by influencing political appointed

senior civil servants that are responsible for the grants program, but legislation itself does not contain clear mechanisms instigating pork barrel politics.

### 3.6. *Elderly residential care centre*

The Flemish region is confronted with an aging population which is a grand policy challenge in the health care domain. One of the measures government has taken is to stimulate investments in extraneous capacity in elderly residential care centres. The acknowledged elderly care centres within the public centres for social welfare that exist in each Flemish municipality can apply for investment grants. Funding levels are agreed upon within government by decree. The criteria that are used are determined by Flemish government and are twofold: fixed demographic programmatic criteria (residential entities per age cohort) and project evaluation criteria (the needs of the area, the profile of the residential care center, vision on elderly care, price, rentability and professional staffing). The competent minister has the delegated power to formally determine the evaluation criteria and can enlarge the framework criteria that government installed by decree. He can add new priority criteria based on his health care policy. In contrast with the other grant programs it is not the minister who eventually decides to allocate the subsidies, but the leading senior civil servant of the Flemish agency for care and health who is politically appointed. Only when the civil servant takes a refusal decision and the rejected applicant files an administrative appeal against the agency's act it is possible for the minister to overrule the administrator. This grant program again confirms the importance of administration and stresses the decision-making power appointed senior civil servants have. If a minister effectively wants to interfere the allocation process he can tailor the evaluation criteria, but he must also maintain a

working relationship in good terms with the head of the agency. The latter might otherwise easily blockade political intrusiveness.

### 3.7. *Dilapidated retail buildings*

The Flemish real estate market for retail buildings faces structural vacancy levels and dilapidated buildings in city and village centres due to economic trends in retail. It is the ambition of Flemish government to help municipalities to invest in reconversion projects of buildings with a strategic location and that local governments can use for their local economic policy (e.g. create start-up incubators, public-private partnerships for new offices, evicting squatters in commercial property). The funding level is decided by Flemish government. All the other components are delegated to the competent ministers. The decision-making process is designed as semi-competitive. Municipalities can apply for funding throughout the year until the budget is entirely spent. The Flemish agency for innovation and entrepreneurship is responsible to organize the call and the evaluation process. Three rather broad criteria are used: the sustainable urban planning vision considering the balance between work, retail and livelihood (40 points), the specific importance of the dilapidated retail building (30 points) and the feasibility of the proposal (30 points). All proposals are reviewed by a jury that is composed of members by the Flemish agency or by other departments. The only requirement to obtain the grants is to score at least 50 points out of 100. The subsidy legislation leaves a void by not mentioning what kind of expertise the jury members need. It is not stated who has the competence to compose the jury. It can be assumed that administration will compose the jury, but as with other grant programs it could be left to ministerial discretion as well. The jury will give its advice to the minister in

order for him to make motivated decisions. The minister does not necessarily need to follow the advice, but can diverge the funding decisions based for good reasons such as geographic spreading of public money. As in the other agency we see that the head of the agency is politically appointed which can also lead to indirect forms of pork barrelling.

### 3.8. *Cultural infrastructure*

Flemish governments provides funding for municipalities and cultural entities to invest in cultural infrastructure such as museums, theatres, operas, libraries and so forth. The cultural infrastructure grants program is targeted for accommodation with supralocal appearances and cultural image building. Flemish governments decides about the policy priorities within the grants program and settles the funding level as well. Government has chosen that the funding is competitive and has partly regulated the formal requirements applicants need to fulfil. The competent minister has the delegated power to organize the application calls. Furthermore, it is up to the minister his discretion to formalize the evaluation criteria that will be used to review the applications. His department organizes the competition, but the minister composes a jury of experts to give their advice. These experts can be bureaucrats, but can also be cultural pundits from the relevant sectors. From a pork barrel politics viewpoint the minister thus has quite a lot of discretionary power: in direct matter by tailoring the evaluation criteria and ditto weighting formula and in an indirect matter by appointing experts in the jury. The minister also has supervisory power to overrule the advise of the jury. An important nuance in the cultural infrastructure grants program is the observation that legislation makes a difference in the final decision making power between large investment in cultural infrastructure and

smaller renovation investments. In the former subsidies the minister needs to formally propose his ranking to Flemish government that eventually decides by consensus, meaning that all ministers in principle have to agree. For smaller grants the minister has the discretionary power to decide individually. A pork barrel explanation for this phenomenon is that the larger the investment, the higher the potential visibility and impact of the grants program, which means that ministers from different political parties might want to bargain in stead of giving full discretion to the competent minister.

#### **4. Results**

Our case study analysis of the legislation of eight discretionary grant programs provides indications that even when strictly applying the proscribed procedure there is still room for partisan behaviour and pork barrel politics. The subsidy regulatory space is permeable and fluid in its interaction with law, politics and administration. The first important finding is that ministers do not hold discretionary power to directly chose the targeted recipients, because ministerial funding decision is always prepared by administration or by a jury. Depending on the selected case we see however that different mechanisms are embedded in regulation that allows ministers to use their discretionary power to affect the allocation of grants.

We structure our qualitative results by answering the questions of the different analytical components of the discretionary grants process. Figure 2 gives an overview of which actor holds discretion in the analysed component of the grants process. For each component we have indicated if it was the Cabinet (“C”), Minister (“M”) or Administration (“A”) who holds decision-making power. This made it possible to draw an overview of the balance of power between these actors in the granting process.

| GRANTS PROGRAM | Policy purpose |   |   | Funding level |   |   | Decision-making process |   |   |                                 |   |   |                     |   |   | Administrative supervision |   |   |            |   |   |
|----------------|----------------|---|---|---------------|---|---|-------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------------|---|---|----------------------------|---|---|------------|---|---|
|                |                |   |   |               |   |   | Process type            |   |   | Selection and weighting formula |   |   | Composition of jury |   |   | Control                    |   |   | Overruling |   |   |
|                | C              | M | A | C             | M | A | C                       | M | A | C                               | M | A | C                   | M | A | C                          | M | A | C          | M | A |
| Sports         | X              |   |   | X             |   |   | X                       |   |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            | X |   |            | X |   |
| Mobility       | X              |   |   | X             |   |   |                         |   |   |                                 |   | X |                     |   | X |                            |   | X |            | X |   |
| Forestation    |                | X |   | X             |   |   |                         | X |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            | X |   |            | X |   |
| Digitalization |                | X |   | X             |   |   |                         | X |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            |   |   |            | X |   |
| Youth          | X              |   |   | X             |   |   | X                       |   |   |                                 |   | X |                     | X |   |                            | X |   |            | X |   |
| Elderly care   | X              |   |   | X             |   |   |                         | X |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            |   | X |            | X |   |
| Retail         |                | X |   | X             |   |   |                         | X |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            | X |   |            | X |   |
| Culture        | X              |   |   | X             |   |   | X                       |   |   |                                 | X |   |                     | X |   |                            | X |   |            | X |   |
| TOTAL          | 5              | 3 | 0 | 8             | 0 | 0 | 3                       | 5 | 0 | 0                               | 6 | 2 | 0                   | 7 | 1 | 0                          | 6 | 2 |            | 8 | 0 |

Figure 2: Balance of power in the grants process between cabinet, minister and administration



In our analysis of every component of the grants program we see that little discretion is left to the minister in defining the policy goal and determining the funding level of the subsidies. The funding level is entirely determined by the Flemish cabinet in budget discussions (8/8). Concerning the policy goals, we have observed that Flemish cabinet sometimes broadly defines the goal and the minister is given the delegated power to elucidate or enlarge the goal of the program. In 3 out of 8 cases minister still has quite a lot of discretionary power adjust the goal in order to broaden the scope of potential targeted recipients.

The balance of power in the component of the decision-making process goes clearly in the direction of the ministers. The choice of the grant process type (competitive / non-competitive) is mostly made by the ministers (5/8) and sometimes by cabinet (3/8). The ministerial discretion is even more clear in the selection criteria and the weighting formula (6/8) and the composition of the jury (7/8). This delegated power gives the minister the discretionary power to tailor the subsidy criteria. In 6 out of 8 cases we have observed the minister's discretion to tailor the evaluation criteria or changing the weighting formula that is used to review grants applications.

Although the ministers not always have the discretion to decide which type of funding will be used, we see that government has chosen to install grants programs that are competitive. By principle this type of funding is intended to ensure that government award grants to the most meritorious municipal applicants. The competitive grants programs are built on the assumption that objective criteria for excellence can be articulated and applied in ways that give the assessors the capability to identify and select the best proposals. Within this decision making process lies the potential for considerable tension. In our case study we have seen

different interwoven mechanisms in the component of decision making in subsidy legislation that may manifest pork barrel politics. As mentioned the most remarkable observation occurs in the formulation of the assessment criteria. Perhaps the most important goal of these criteria is to ensure objectivity. Nonetheless we see that a lot of these criteria are very broadly defined which allows political considerations to intrude into the decision making process. When objective criteria are articulated, but vaguely formulated and applied by appointed partisans, it might not be an effective vehicle for shielding the process from political lobbying. It is quite often so that cabinet defines the broad criteria, but the competent minister has the delegated power to tailor them.

It is within this evaluation process that the ministers have the discretionary power to intervene. His discretion can be high and direct by changing the evaluation criteria and thus determining the rules of the game, but discretion can also be exercised indirectly by composing the jury in a political manner. In 7 out of 8 cases minister holds discretionary power to appoint experts or administrators to be member of a jury to evaluate subsidy applications. In 4 out of 8 cases it is mentioned that the assessors need to have a certain expertise in the field or have delegated bureaucratic power to take budgetary decisions. 7 of the 8 programs have created large discretionary power for the minister to appoint partisan officials to seat or to steer an evaluation committee. Legislation does not literally do so, but creates for example a void by not mentioning which requirements need to be fulfilled to become a jury member.

In all these programs the organization of the competition is organized by departments or agencies that are led by senior civil-servants who are politically

appointed. This leads to the open question to which degree these political appointed senior civil-servants are susceptible to political favours. Literature suggests that senior civil servants balance responsiveness with astuteness towards ministers while maintaining neutral competence, but sometimes execute a form of proxy politics in which they actively try to align fellow servants with their version of the minister's wishes (van Dorp, 2022a). In his research van Dorp's targeted a specific type of senior civil servants, the ones that must do more than serve the government of the day, but also next government and the one after that, just as well to ensure that governments and public bureaucratic entities operate in accordance with the values of good governance. These senior civil servants habitually struggle with keeping a balance between the latter imperative and their responsiveness towards the ministers (van Dorp 2022b). If this phenomenon occurs amongst non-political appointed senior civil servants, it can be expected to be even more existing among their political counterparts because it is assumed that the fidelity to the mandate is less stronger than partisan loyalty.

In the appointment of senior civil servants unavoidably a public service bargain originates (Hood & Lodge, 2006). How this public service bargain does get filled in depends on the type of relationship that governments have and the rewards that governments give them in return. From literature we know that three types of public service can be distinguished: the "spoils" bargain, the "Schafferian bargain" and the "managerial" bargain (Cooper, 2020). Under the first bargain the most important feature in staffing personnel is partisan loyalty which leads to large administrative turnover. The second bargain is focused on elite bureaucrats to possess in-depth knowledge of issues that can give the ministers advise. To foster expertise and advice in a frank and fearless spirit new governments intentionally

leave senior bureaucrats in their positions. The third bargain is centred on seeking managers who are not interested in repaying partisan loyalty, but who are committed to make things happen and accomplish government's policy agenda. A change of minister leads to a turnover in management as well. The Flemish public service bargaining is rather "hybrid" so it cannot be clearly stated what role these administrators tend to play in pork barrel politics. It can be hypothesized that these senior civil servants do play a role in influencing the allocation process, for example by executing a form of proxy politics (e.g. cases where targeted recipients are known beforehand and the deliberating process is framed towards this outcome by the senior civil servant and political affiliated members of the jury). Given the potential importance of these political appointed senior civil servants it would be insightful to conduct a Richard Fenno wise (2003) field research study in which we use a blend of qualitative methods such as observation, interviewing and participation. This can offer more in depth content and reveal how different involved actors view the decision-making process.

Last, discretionary power can also be executed in the administrative supervision the grants process. a supervising authority. In 6 out of 8 cases the minister is formally appointed as supervisory organ on the allocating process. In 8 out of 8 cases the minister has the discretionary power to overrule the advice of the administration or the jury. We categorize this mechanism as a direct form of discretion because the minister can directly intervene in the allocation process, but consider this mechanism to be a form of lower discretion because the minister will always have to motivate his decision based on good reasons. He will not use supervisory power to change the entire ranking, but pinpoint favourable applicants rather subtle because the authority of the supervisor can be questioned by applying

municipalities who are seeking legal recourse and redemption. Irregular granting acts can be suspended and annulled by the council of state, Belgium's administrative supreme court. Overtly using supervisory power is risky from a political and legal viewpoint and is perhaps not the most effective pork barrel mechanism.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the literature on pork barrel politics by investigating how ministerial discretionary power is regulated in intergovernmental grant programs. A high level of discretion is often implicitly assumed to be an ontological part of subsidies, hence the academic overlooking to study the subject more thoroughly. Through the theoretical prism of regulatory politics, in which we consider subsidy legislation to be the result of a concealed political debate and legislative bargaining, we have conducted a case study analysis of a purposive sample of eight grant programs in Flanders. We have chosen critical cases that clearly confirm theoretical assumptions, meaning that grants with high visibility are more prone to political interference as politicians might expect a more rewarding attitude amongst voters if they can clearly distinguish a project's outcome.

By analysing four different components of the grant programs (policy purpose, resources and funding level, decision-making process and administrative supervision) we were able to determine formally which actor was given discretionary power. Our case study provides indications that even when strictly applying the proscribed procedure there is still room for partisan behaviour and pork barrel politics. The subsidy regulatory space is permeable and fluid in its interaction with law, politics and administration. The first important finding is that

the ministers do not hold discretionary power to directly chose the targeted recipients. Depending on the selected case we see however that different mechanisms are embedded in regulation that allows the ministers to use their discretionary power to affect the allocation of grants.

The highest and most direct form of ministerial discretion we see in legislation is the power they have to tailor subsidy criteria. The minister can for example change or elucidate the evaluation criteria that are used to review municipal applications or he can adjust the weighting formula that jury members need to use to give scores. In all grant programs the minister is given supervisory power which means he can overrule decisions of administration or the advice of a jury. We see this mechanism as a direct form of discretion, but one with a lower power degree because it can only be used to pinpoint preferred applicants. Furthermore, we have found ministerial discretionary power often to be indirect. Given that 7 out of 8 cases were designed as competitive funding led by administration, we have observed that the minister has the discretion to appoint members to evaluate the applications of local governments. While some of the grant programs explicitly mention the expertise these assessors need to have, the minister has the discretion to appoint partisan officials. By doing so the minister can indirectly interfere in the decision making process. In theory it can be expected that in appointing partisan civil servants a public service bargain originates that induces pork barrel politics. Consequently a research field study is preferable to validate if the formal mechanisms we have found does lead to bargaining in practice.

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