

Media Coverage of Earmarks and the Spiral of Cynicism  
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## Introduction

The information one receives through the media influences their individual attitudes about politics, politicians, and public policies. Media coverage of political issues in America is often framed with a cynical lens and news reporters focus on dramatized and isolated cases that highlight perceived flaws and weaknesses of politicians and political institutions. Repeated coverage of a particular issue written with a cynical frame leads individuals to become increasingly cynical. This research focuses on the effect of media cynicism on attitudes toward congressional earmarks to determine the effect of cynicism on one's political beliefs. Congressional earmarks allow members of Congress to use funding from established federal programs to address specific needs in their districts.<sup>1</sup> However, overall support for congressional earmarks is low and there has been an effective ban on earmarks in Congress, and President Barack Obama has signaled he would veto any legislation containing earmarks. Such decisive steps have been taken by politicians in response to the widespread media coverage of earmarks framed with a cynical lens, and this coverage can alter the public's attitude toward earmarks.

This research seeks to determine whether repeated exposure to news coverage of earmarks increases an individual's cynicism toward the subject. This paper documents the results of a study in which individuals were surveyed on their opinion of earmarks and then exposed to a range of news stories regarding earmarks. The subjects were then post-tested to determine whether there was a change in their level of cynicism regarding earmarks. Additionally, repeated media coverage of

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<sup>1</sup> Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q Kelly. 2011. *Cheese Factories on the Moon: Why Earmarks Are Good for American Democracy*. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers). p 31.

earmarks expands the scope of the perceived issue and leads consumers of news to become more cynical and to believe that all earmarks are wasteful and wrought with corruption.<sup>2</sup>

### **Media and Public Perception: Background and Hypothesis**

The media influences public opinion on issues and coverage of an issue conveyed with an inherently cynical undertone affects public opinion on a subject.<sup>3</sup> Previous research confirms that by using conflict-oriented and strategic frames where politics is portrayed as a zero-sum game in which an “opponent's” gain is perceived as a loss, media stories only serve to increase cynicism in the population.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, when reporters focus on perceived self-interests as motivation for political decisions, they create mistrust that feeds back into and justifies such reporting.<sup>5</sup> Reporting of earmarks is portrayed through a cynical lens in which the media exposes perceived government corruption, but this reporting is often without context of the expenditure’s necessity or the proportional impact on total spending. By framing politics as a game, media reports disregard substance and broadcast sensational stories without relevant background information. Although individuals believe earmarks constitute 40% of the federal budget, prior to the effective Congressional ban on earmarks, these expenditures amounted to roughly one percent of federal spending.<sup>6</sup> Earmarks allow democratically elected representatives to secure funding for local projects, but repeated coverage of these proportionally minute expenditures increase individual’s cynicism toward earmarks and ultimately lead to a reduction in Congressional spending on local necessities.

### **Experiment Design and Methodology**

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<sup>2</sup> Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q Kelly. 2011. *Cheese Factories on the Moon: Why Earmarks Are Good for American Democracy*. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers). p 101.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Nelson & Zoey M. Oxley. 1999. *Issue Framing Effects on Belief Importance and Opinion*. (Cambridge University Press). p 1047.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *News Frames, Political Cynicism, and Media Cynicism*. 1996. “Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, Vol. 546, The Media and Politics. p 79.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p 84.

<sup>6</sup> Lopez, Dulce, and David Winston. *Media and Individual Attitudes Toward Congressional Earmarks*. California State University Channel Islands, 2011. p 5.

To determine the effect of media cynicism, data was collected through a survey-based laboratory experiment that examined whether readers' level of cynicism is affected by consuming media. Previous research showed a correlation between reading one piece of media and internalized political cynicism.<sup>7</sup> This research aims to determine the effect of *multiple* exposures to stories regarding earmarks. Repeated exposure to an issue affects individuals' perception of the issue's prevalence, and it is hypothesized that repeated cynical coverage of earmarks imbues individuals with greater cynicism.

This experiment consisted of 199 California State University Channel Islands students during Fall 2012. All subjects were surveyed to gauge their opinions about earmarks. They were then randomly assigned into three treatment and a control group. The control group was given three stories that had no reference to earmarks. Treatment group one received one story about earmarks and two non-earmark stories; Treatment group two received two stories about earmarks and one non-earmark story; and treatment group three received three stories about earmarks. Respondents were subsequently post-tested to determine if they were more cynical after reading media stories (Figure 1). It is hypothesized that:

**H:** The more stories about earmarks subjects are exposed to the greater their level of cynicism about earmarks.

Pre and post test questions were intended to measure attitudes about earmarks: 1) that earmarks are “a waste of taxpayer dollars;” 2) that “Congress should not fund projects through...earmarks;” 3) Earmarks only “provide benefits to a narrow group of Americans;” and 4) Projects funded through earmarks would “be more appropriately funded at the local level.” Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to quantify their level of agreement with these statements and their support for earmarks as a whole and whether they would vote for a Representative who pursues earmarks.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

## Findings and Implications

These findings suggest that repeated media coverage of earmarks have a significant effect on respondents' individual perception of earmarks. Readers' cynicism significantly increases each time they read a news story regarding earmarks. When exposed to one story, there is a mean change in attitudes of -0.28, significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. When exposed to two stories, a mean change in attitude of -0.36 ( $p < 0.01$ ) is noted, signifying greater cynicism within respondents. Finally, individuals in treatment group three who viewed three stories evidenced a mean attitude change of -0.46 ( $p < 0.001$ ), meaning these individuals on average held more cynical views of earmarks as compared to the control group and other treatment groups. Figure two shows that respondents' belief that Congress should not fund earmarks steadily increases with increased exposure to news stories covering earmarks. Negative numerical values indicate that the mean attitude toward earmarks is more negative in the post test compared to the pretest. Figure three illustrates similar results when researching the effect of repeated exposure to these stories on individual's perception of earmarks as wasteful. On average, respondents' attitudes become increasingly negative with each story read and tend to believe earmarks are wasteful, serve narrow interests, and should not be funded by Congress. Additionally, these results demonstrate that those in treatment group three indicated they would not vote for a Representative who pursues earmarks. There is a positive correlation between exposure to repeated news stories and increased cynicism about earmarks, and on average, individuals' cynicism increased with each negative story read.

Table one presents the results of repeated media exposure when additional explanatory variables were controlled, like prior knowledge of earmarks, overall political knowledge, and partisan identification, all of which were taken into account to determine whether these factors affect respondents' attitudes toward earmarks.<sup>8</sup> These findings remain robust when controlling for such

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<sup>8</sup> A difference of means test was conducted between the treatment groups and control group to determine the effect of the negative stories. A one-tailed test was used to determine significance as there is not theoretical reason to believe the findings would go in the opposite direction. Further multivariate tests were conducted to ensure the

variables and the effects indicated by the bivariate results are largely unchanged. This indicates that repeated exposure to media coverage of earmarks increases cynicism about earmarks.

## **Conclusion**

This research sought to determine the effect of multiple exposures to media stories on individuals' cynicism about earmarks. Through a survey-based lab experiment, it was found that repeated exposure to stories leads to a statistically significant increase in political cynicism within individuals. As shown by this and previous research, media coverage of a political issue, in this case earmarks, can lead to a significant change in readers' attitudes toward the subject.<sup>9</sup> Repeated sensationalized coverage devoid of context can produce a population cynical of an inherently democratic aspect of American politics. These findings have serious implications for American politics as Congress was given the power of the purse to allow democracy to determine the allocation of the country's assets, but this unfounded increase in cynicism toward the most democratic aspect of American finances can lead to a decrease in funding for local necessities. Earmarks are portrayed through a cynical lens as inefficient and unnecessary, but if Congress cannot wield the power of the purse as provided for in the Constitution, the only other option is democratically unaccountable centralized decision making in the executive bureaucracy. While quite efficient, placing the fiscal authority of the country in the hands of a select few does not reflect the inherently democratic principles described in the Constitution.

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findings were robust even when compared against prior knowledge of earmarks, level of political knowledge, and partisan identification.

<sup>9</sup> Lopez, Dulce, and David Winston. *Media and Individual Attitudes Toward Congressional Earmarks*. California State University Channel Islands, 2011.

### Figure 1: Excerpts from Two News Stories Presented to Respondents

**Excerpt From News Story One:** Taxpayers for Common Sense reports a total of 5,224 earmarks in the 2010 spending bill, which also includes funding for Medicare and Medicaid. Groups like Citizens Against Government Waste have drawn attention to dozens of items they consider questionable. Here's just a sampling: -- \$150,000 for educational programs and exhibitions at the National Building Museum.

-- \$400,000 for renovation of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. -- \$150,000 for exhibits at the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation in Buffalo, N.Y. -- \$500,000 for Mississippi River exhibits at the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, Iowa. -- \$200,000 for the Washington National Opera. -- \$30,000 for the Woodstock Film Festival Youth Initiative. -- \$2.7 million for the University of Nebraska Medical Center, to support surgical operations in space. -- \$200,000 for a visitor's center in Bastrop, Texas. -- \$700,000 for a project called, "Shrimp Industry Fishing Effort Research Continuation," at the National Marine Fisheries Service in Silver Spring, Md. -- \$292,200 for the elimination of blight in Scranton, Pa. -- \$750,000 for exhibits at the World Food Prize Hall of Laureates in Iowa. -- \$1.6 million for a tram between the Marshall Flight Center and Huntsville Botanical Garden in Alabama.

**Excerpt from News Story Two:** For nine years, Texans in Congress have been steering federal money to a Fort Worth airport with no passenger flights.

The funds -- \$26 million since 2001 -- are going to lengthen two runways at Fort Worth Alliance Airport to 11,000 feet from their current spans of 9,600 feet and 8,220 feet. The improvements will enable fully loaded cargo planes to take off during the hottest days, when more runway length is needed, airport spokesman David Pelletier said. That will be a big help to the airport's principal cargo carrier, FedEx, which has a major hub at Alliance.

"FedEx is the only carrier that uses the runways on a regular basis," Pelletier said.

FedEx and competitor United Parcel Service (UPS) have benefited on numerous occasions from "earmarks," which are specific projects that lawmakers add to spending bills, a USA TODAY review shows of the annual transportation spending bills for the past nine years.

Since 2001, \$100 million in earmarked money has gone to 11 small airports where one of the two major cargo carriers has a large operation with daily flights. The funds have paid to expand or upgrade runways and taxiways to handle the large jets flown by FedEx and UPS.

Critics of earmarks, such as Steve Ellis of Taxpayers for Common Sense, call the spending "corporate welfare" because the money for airport projects mostly comes from the millions of people a year who buy airline tickets with federal taxes and mostly helps large companies.

"This isn't really benefiting the traveling public that much, and yet we're using earmarks to improve the business cost for FedEx or other businesses," Ellis said.

Airport officials say the upgrades boost a local economy. "To tie it to FedEx is a little misleading," Pelletier said of Alliance's runway project. "It benefits the whole area." Longer runways should increase activity at the airport, draw new cargo airlines and add jobs, he said.

Runway extensions also can improve safety by giving jets more room to land, said Ed Bolen, CEO of the National Business Aviation Association. "Most communities have a whole lot of reasons why they want to invest in their runways," he said.

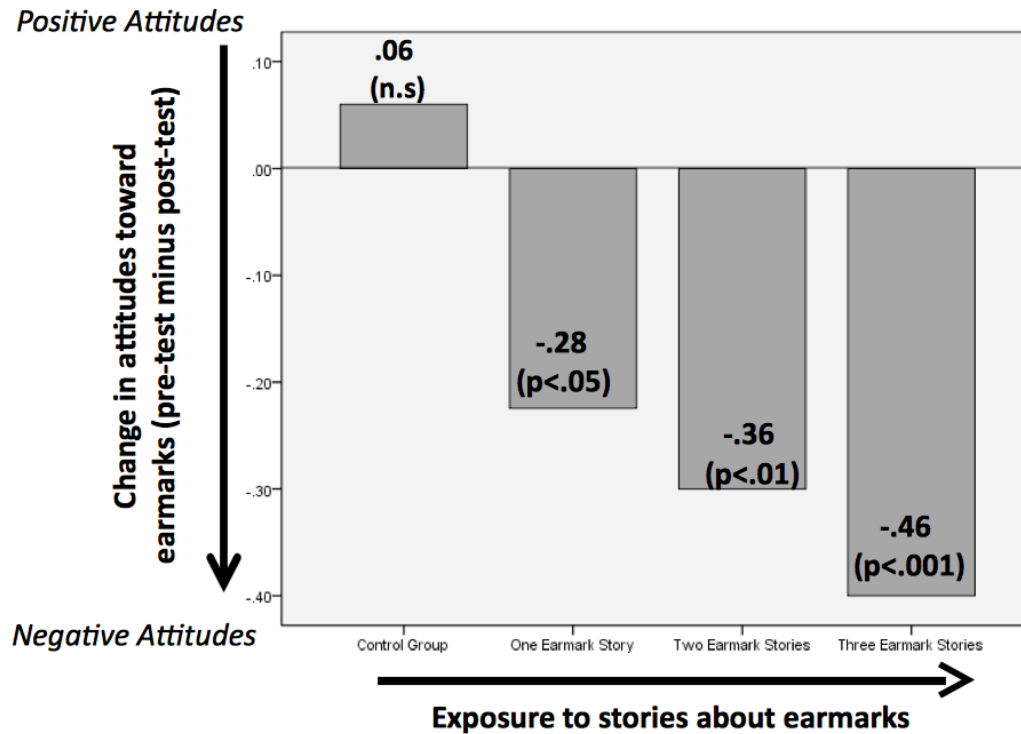
FedEx spokesman Maury Lane said the company and the airports where it operates "have invested billions of dollars and created tens of thousands of jobs that generate many millions in tax revenue."

Although airport projects can have broad benefits, FedEx and UPS are vocal about wanting upgrades. For example:

\*UPS told Capital Regional International Airport in Lansing, Mich., that it wanted the main runway lengthened from 8,000 feet to 8,500 feet so the company's DC-8 jets could take off with full loads of fuel and cargo, airport Executive Director Robert Selig said. "Their preference was the longer runway," he said.

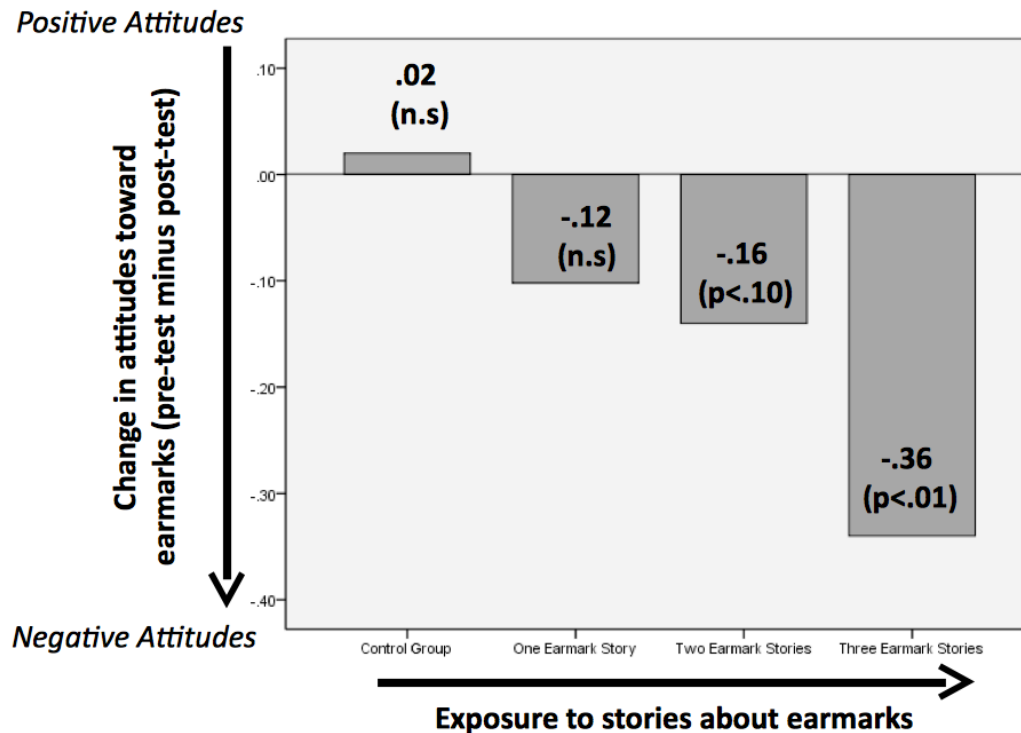
\*At Montana's Great Falls International Airport, FedEx "indicated the need for" a system that lets planes take off and land in low visibility, airport Director Cynthia Schultz said. FedEx has a regional hub at Great Falls. Airport officials, feeling federal bureaucrats had overlooked them for years, lobbied Montana lawmakers, who delivered \$7.5 million in earmarked funds from 2001 to 2005 to install the system and to improve a runway, Schultz said.

Figure 2: Media Exposure and Belief That Congress Should Not Fund Earmarks



Note: Difference of means relative to the control group. All values of  $p$  reflect one-tailed tests of significance.

Figure 3: Media Exposure and Belief That Earmarks Are Wasteful



Note: Difference of means relative to the control group. All values of  $p$  reflect one-tailed tests of significance.

**Table 1: Multivariate Tests of Robustness of Findings with Statistical Significance**

Question	Experimental Group	Naïve Model Estimate	Full Model Estimate
Earmarks wasteful	1	-.12 (n.s.)	-.11 (n.s.)
	2	-.16 (p<.10)	-.14 (p<.15)
	3	-.36 (p<.01)	-.36 (p<.01)
Should not fund earmarks	1	-.28 (p<.05)	-.28 (p<.01)
	2	-.36 (p<.01)	-.36 (p<.01)
	3	-.46 (p<.001)	-.46 (p<.001)
Earmarks serve narrow interests	1	-.06 (n.s.)	-.06 (n.s.)
	2	-.16 (p<.15)	-.17 (p<.10)
	3	-.18 (p<.10)	-.18 (p<.10)
Vote for an "earmarker"	1	-.16 (n.s.)	-.10 (n.s.)
	2	-.10 (n.s.)	-.11 (n.s.)
	3	-.30 (p<.05)	-.29 (p<.05)

Note: Regression coefficients relative to the control group. Negative values indicate attitudes becoming less sympathetic to earmarks. Full model: Attitudes  $f$ (treatment, prior knowledge of earmarks, political knowledge, partisan identification). All values of  $p$  reflect one-tailed tests of significance.