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Organized Voters: Elections and Public Funding of Nonprofits

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Abstract

What makes politicians respond to civil society organizations' demands? I use new data on government transfers to French *associations* and exploit close elections to show that politicians grant more funds to ideologically close organizations when the local incumbent is a political ally and was elected by a small margin. The results are consistent with politicians and organizations exchanging financial support for electoral support. Organizations secure funding because of the votes they can deliver, not because of their campaign contributions; however the fact that transfers appear to be conditioned on support may undermine their ability to help hold politicians accountable.

Keywords: civil society organizations, elections, distributive politics, clientelism

JEL codes: D72, L31

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1 Introduction

Many scholars have long considered a rich fabric of civil society organizations to be crucial for the viability of representative democracy (de Tocqueville, 1835; Putnam et al., 1993; Warren, 2001). Indeed, civil society organizations provide voters with information, which helps them hold representatives accountable on issues that matter to them. They bring together citizens who share similar concerns, and can thus promote public deliberation and contribute to shaping public opinion (Habermas, 1996). They also voice the demands of a variety of groups, thereby encouraging policy makers to take the interests of a broad range of stakeholders into account.

Some of the demands that civil society organizations make to elected officials concern financial support. As in many countries, organizations in France can apply for transfers from multiple layers of government, from local to national. In this way, governments support organizations they consider useful, from homeless shelters to environmental protection groups. Yet, in the absence of any objective measure of quality, funding decisions are often largely left to the discretion of elected officials. Whatever their assessment of organizations' merits, politicians may be more inclined to meet their demands if they think it can help them win elections. Case studies indeed suggest that they consider organizations' electoral support when deciding which ones to fund.¹ Whether this is systematic and, if so, which groups have their demands met, remains an open question.

In this paper, I investigate what makes politicians responsive to civil society organizations' demands and explore the role of electoral motives. I study how politicians in France, when in government, distribute public funding to local organizations and ask whether the party affiliation of local office holders influences their decision. Indeed, they may wish to reward groups for helping a co-party candidate win, or support organizations where an ally could claim credit. Intuitively, if central government politicians only consider organizations' activities when granting transfers, it should not matter who the local incumbent is. If they think local races can be tilted, they may favor – or penalize – certain organizations in order to help co-party candidates. This setting therefore provides a clean test for whether the funding of organizations serves electoral motives.

France provides an ideal setting. It has many civil society organizations, often referred to as *associations*, which draw 25% of their resources from public transfers (Tchernog, 2013). Ministries are responsible for many grant allocation decisions each year, meaning that organizations scattered around the country have their applications reviewed by the same services. This allows me to make an in-depth study of whether the local political environment influences the amounts that organizations receive, holding the screen-

¹In his work on political clienteles in France, Tafani (2003) devotes a chapter to Jacques Chirac and explains that, when he was the mayor of Paris, 10% of the municipal budget funded organizations that he had carefully selected, in part based on how likely they were to 'reciprocate' and support him in elections.

ing procedure fixed. Next, France's campaign finance rules since 1995 forbid associations to make campaign contributions and impose a limit on campaign spending, as is the case in many countries.² This regulatory setting contrasts with that of the US, on which much of the interest group literature has focused so far. It helps us to consider organizations' role in elections differently than through the lens of campaign contributions.

I assemble a new comprehensive data set of all government transfers to associations in France over a period of more than 10 years. Organizations submit thorough applications to ministries, which are then reviewed by bureaucrats and elected officials. Local politicians play no official role in the procedure, but sometimes informally support specific organizations' applications. From 2005 to 2016, transfers totaled 17.1 billion euros, and were split among 72,351 distinct organizations. I use administrative data to locate organizations' establishments. Combining data sources, I obtain detailed information on organizations, how much they receive, and the local political landscape.

I use a regression discontinuity design to isolate quasi-random variation in the partisan affiliation of mayors. Considering the 2001, 2008 and 2014 municipal elections, 403 were decided by a margin of 2 percentage points or less. At the cutoff, political alignment between the mayor and the government is orthogonal to the characteristics of local organizations and voters. In using this method, I address the concern that omitted factors such as voters' preferences may codetermine organizations' attributes and election outcomes. If transfers improve the electoral fate of local allies, mayors' political affiliations will likely impact how much local organizations are ultimately given. I interpret this as a sign that electoral motives play a role in transfer allocation decisions. I also discuss alternative explanations.

I use the mission statement of organizations to determine their ideological leaning, and I show that the government systematically channels more money to congruent organizations in locations where the mayor is a political ally. Organizations that are ideologically opposed or moderate do not receive strictly less, nor strictly more. The effect appears to be driven by electoral concerns, as it concentrates where the incumbent won by a small margin, where the government party spent more on campaigning, and it is larger at the end of the term. In contrast with an explanation that centers on mayors screening organizations, effects are not driven by young entities, but rather by older ones that have a longer track record. Overall, ideologically close organizations receive 1.4 extra euros per inhabitant each year due to alignment, 8.4 euros over a six-year term.³

The discussion of the mechanisms is guided by a simple model. The first channel emphasizes voters crediting the local incumbent and the government party for transfers

²Speck and Olabe (2013) report that about two thirds of the OECD countries have introduced campaign spending caps for parties or candidates. Avis et al. (2022) make a similar point.

³As a benchmark, ruling party candidates in swing municipalities spend on average 1.1 euros per capita.

granted to organizations. One prediction is that both the left and the right, when in government, should target the same organizations: those valued by a large set of voters and by undecided voters. I find the opposite. The left and the right favor distinct groups, measured in terms of ideology and field. They also do not favor organizations that have bipartisan support, whose action may be recognized by a broad range of voters. Transfers are targeted at core constituencies. Another prediction is that the government party may cut transfers to prevent an opponent from receiving credit. Comparing swing opposition municipalities to safer ones along the mayoral term, I find no evidence of such a pattern.

The other channel centers on a clientelistic exchange in which organizations provide electoral support and politicians grant transfers. My results are consistent with transfers being conditioned on electoral support – extra transfers primarily benefit congruent organizations – and on the aligned candidate’s victory – ideologically close organizations do not seem to receive more where the candidate lost. In line with the idea that they are valued for the votes they can deliver, organizations receive more funds where likely supporters may not be taken for granted given the presence of another candidate ideologically close to the government party. Finally, I use individual-level survey data to understand why winning the support of ideologically congruent organization members may be valuable to politicians. They are more politically active, more vocal about their views and better networked to other voters, potentially making them local opinion leaders.

Literature. My work contributes to three strands of the literature. First, it relates to the interest groups literature, which has extensively explored the role of campaign contributions in making politicians responsive, mostly in a US context (see [Grossman and Helpman, 2001](#); [Ansolabehere et al., 2003](#); [Stratmann, 2005](#); [De Figueiredo and Richter, 2014](#); [Bombardini and Trebbi, 2020](#)). Prompted by the apparent excess return of campaign contributions ([Tullock, 1972](#)), researchers have studied other, less visible, ways in which interest groups seek to influence elections and policy making, with particular attention given to corporate donations to non-profit organizations ([Bertrand et al., 2020, 2021, 2023](#)). My work instead focuses on the relationship between non-profit organizations and elected officials, and how such organizations can represent their own interests and secure funding from politicians. Next, I study civil society groups with no contributory power, and explore under what conditions politicians respond to their demands. This provides a better understanding of the source of influence of nonbusiness interest groups, whose campaign contributions are generally small compared to their influence over politicians ([De Figueiredo and Richter, 2014](#)). [Bombardini and Trebbi \(2011\)](#) point to a substitution pattern between votes and money regarding industry groups’ influence in the US. [Bouton et al. \(2021\)](#) document a flip-flopping behavior, whereby politicians

strike a balance between reelection incentives and ideology in siding with single-issue minorities.⁴

Second, I contribute to the distributive politics literature (Golden and Min, 2013). I draw on papers studying how political alignment influences the allocation of inter-governmental transfers due to partisanship (see Levitt and Snyder, 1995; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro, 2008; Arulampalam et al., 2009; Brollo and Nannicini, 2012; Albouy, 2013; Bracco et al., 2015; Muraközy and Telegdy, 2016; Curto-Grau et al., 2018). I follow this literature and use close elections to isolate quasi-experimental variation in the partisan affiliation of French mayors. I study transfers to non-profit organizations rather than to local governments, and also find that alignment has a positive impact on transfer-receipt. However, I find little support for a credit-claiming mechanism, which is the mechanism often emphasized in this literature. Bueno (2018) studies governmental grants to non-state organizations in Brazil and finds that voters do not credit local politicians for transfers.⁵ My results differ, as organizations in aligned municipalities receive additional funding, not less. I rationalize this by emphasizing a clientelistic exchange mechanism.

Finally, this paper speaks to the clientelism literature (see Hicken, 2011; Mares and Young, 2016; Hicken and Nathan, 2020). Holland and Palmer-Rubin (2015) find organizational membership to be the strongest predictor of exposure to clientelism and argue that interest organizations negotiate ties to a party and persuade their members to lend it their support.⁶ Schaffer and Baker (2015) propose an alternative to vote buying (Stokes, 2005) and turnout buying (Nichter, 2008), namely persuasion buying whereby parties target people who are “opinion-leading epicenters of informal conversation networks.” They find members of civil society organizations to be prime targets of clientelism. This paper also relates to recent works highlighting clients’ role in making requests and conditioning their votes on having their demands met (Nichter and Peress, 2017). Finally, my work speaks to the long-standing debate on voter targeting (Cox and McCubbins, 1986; Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987; Dixit and Londregan, 1996).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces a simple conceptual framework. Section 3 presents the institutional setting. Section 4 presents the data. Section 5 explains the identification strategy. Section 6 presents the main results and Section 7 discusses the mechanisms. Section 8 concludes.

⁴Berry and Gersen (2010) and Anzia (2011) study school board elections and show that when special interest voters account for a larger share of voters, they have more influence over policy outcomes.

⁵She finds that the central government is therefore able to increase public good provision in unaligned localities while preventing credit hijacking. It results in additional grants to non-state organizations in unaligned municipalities.

⁶The authors note that “brokers embedded in interest organizations operate much like special interest groups attempting to extract goods and policies.” (p. 1196)

2 Conceptual framework

In Section [A](#) of the Online Appendix, I develop a simple model illustrating several ways in which transfers to civil society organizations could increase the win probability of local government party candidates. I derive empirical predictions for each mechanism, with special attention given to the role of political alignment. They guide the empirical analysis.

The model. I start with a brief summary of the model. The government party decides on the funding of a local organization with a twofold goal: (i) to fund the organization based on its ideological preferences, and (ii) to increase the win probability of the local aligned candidate who, if elected, brings benefits to the party. It is willing to depart from its bliss allocation to the extent that ideological costs do not exceed partisan returns.

I build on a standard probabilistic model of voting to formalize voters' behavior. In each municipality, where the mayor is either aligned or unaligned, they choose between two candidates: a government party candidate and an opposition party candidate. I focus on competitive races. Voters choose the aligned candidate based on her general popularity and their personal inclination toward her. In addition, a fraction of voters are part of a local organization and can be influenced by how much it receives in transfers.

I model two ways in which transfers to organizations can influence voters. The first one hinges on voters crediting politicians for an organization receiving funding. I assume that they observe how much funding an organization has and derive utility from it. They are, however, unaware of the origin of the funds and can attribute credit to the local incumbent and the government party (see [Arulampalam et al., 2009](#); [Brollo and Nannicini, 2012](#); [Curto-Grau et al., 2018](#)). This impacts which candidate they vote for at the end of the term. For this reason, the party in power has incentives to distribute funds tactically to boost the popularity of government party candidates while preventing opponents from gaining votes.

The second mechanism describes a reciprocal exchange between the government party and an organization. To win its support, the government party promises government transfers to an organization. The organization faces a strictly positive cost for supporting the aligned candidate, but an ideologically closer organization requires a lower promised amount to become supportive. I consider two cooperating equilibria. In the first one, the government party conditions transfers on the organization being supportive, irrespective of election outcomes. In the second one, it further conditions transfers on the aligned candidate winning, thereby tying the organization's access to financial support to the candidate's electoral fate. The fact that the amount received is conditioned on

the organization's support behavior makes this exchange clientelistic in nature (Hicken, 2011).

Predictions. The predictions associated to each mechanism are the following.

Predictions (Credit attribution). (1.a.) If only the incumbent is credited, an organization in a competitive aligned municipality benefits from larger government transfers. An otherwise similar organization in a competitive unaligned municipality suffers transfer cuts. (1.b.) If only the government party is credited, organizations in competitive municipalities, whether aligned or unaligned, receive additional transfers. (1.c.) If both the incumbent and the government party are credited, organizations in competitive aligned municipalities receive strictly more government transfers than otherwise similar organizations in unaligned municipalities. Organizations in competitive unaligned municipalities receive additional transfers (resp. face transfer cuts) if the government receives more (resp. less) credit than the incumbent. (2.) When in power, both parties target the same organizations, irrespective of ideology: those valued by a broader set of voters and those valued by more responsive voters.

Predictions (Reciprocal exchange). (1.a.) If transfers are not conditioned on the aligned candidate's victory, supportive organizations receive electorally motivated transfers in competitive municipalities, irrespective of alignment. (1.b.) If transfers are conditioned on the aligned candidate's victory, supportive organizations receive partisan transfers only if the aligned candidate won. The government neither cuts nor increases transfers to organizations in unaligned municipalities. (2.) Given their predisposition toward the government party, congruent organizations should be more likely to show support in exchange for a given promised amount, and to be rewarded with transfers. (3.) If transfers are conditioned on electoral success, they need to be larger where the aligned candidate is expected to lose, as organizations place a low probability on the promise materializing. (4.) The government grants larger transfers to organizations that reach a larger fraction of voters, and that reach voters whose vote choice is responsive to the organization's stance.

3 Institutional background

3.1 Nonprofit organizations in France

Legal status. The organizations studied in this paper are referred to as *associations* in French. Their status is defined in a 1901 law. Formally, they are groups of at least two persons pooling resources to pursue a common goal other than sharing profits. To have

a legal existence, members of the association must declare its name, purpose, address, charter and the name of board members to the competent authorities. The process is simple, and nearly 70,000 of them are created each year (approximately 1 per 1,000 inhabitants). Once created, an organization can sign contracts, take legal action, and receive donations and transfers. Donations are not tax-deductible, unless the organization goes through a more stringent process determining whether its activity is of “general interest.” Not all organizations can receive public funds: religious organizations and political organizations (political party, support committee of a candidate, etc.) are excluded.⁷ Organizations are exempt from paying taxes (VAT, local business taxes, etc).

Number and size of organizations. There are an estimated 1.3 million active associations in France, i.e. nearly 1 per 50 inhabitants. The share of the population claiming to be a member of at least one organization has been stable at around 43% since the 1980s (Burricand and Gleizes, 2016). Most organizations are fairly small: 72% have annual resources below 10,000 euros; 48% have fewer than 50 members; and 42.5% operate at the municipality level. Appendix Figure E.1 depicts the relative size of each sector, based on Tchernonog (2013) data. Sports, leisure activity, and culture account respectively for many organizations, but for smaller shares of the overall budget, reflecting their small size and scope. The opposite is true for social work and education organizations.

Revenues. *Associations* derive 49.5% of their resources from public entities, most of which comes from municipalities, counties and the central government.⁸ Those public resources come in the form of transfers or public procurement contracts in roughly equal proportions. 93% of public funding is targeted at organizations with at least one paid employee (12% of organizations), as they tend to be more professionalized and older. Yet, most entities – 61% – obtain subsidies, however small (Tchernonog, 2013). Organizations also receive in-kind resources from local authorities, such as the right to use public facilities for their events. 82% of organizations are hosted freely, most of the time in municipal buildings (Tchernonog, 2013). They therefore largely rely on the public sector to obtain monetary and in-kind resources.

The transfers studied here (*subventions*) differ from procurement contracts in that they are not payments for privately provided services. They are discretionary transfers meant to support the activity or project of an organization, as initiated and defined by the organization itself. Because there are no widely agreed-on criteria to identify which organiza-

⁷Political parties benefit from public support, but through a different scheme (see Cagé, 2020).

⁸In particular, organizations receive 11.5% of their resources from municipalities, 12.3% from *départements*, 3.5% from *régions*, 11.3% from the central government and administrations, 6.7% from social welfare agencies (CAF for instance), and residual shares from other public entities. In total, funds from public entities account for 49.5% of organizations’ resources.

tions deserve to receive transfers, elected officials have a substantial amount of discretion regarding transfer allocation, and the selection process regularly draws criticism.⁹ The jurisprudence notes that receiving a transfer is not a right, and that the decision is made solely by governments, which do not need to provide reasons justifying their choices.

Their private resources mostly come from their operating revenues (61%) and membership fees (11%). Charitable contributions – either from individuals, corporations or foundations – account for 4% of total resources, despite generous tax incentives.¹⁰

Obtaining government transfers. To receive public transfers from the central government, organizations must submit application forms.¹¹ Organizations send their application to the appropriate ministry (Ministry of Culture for cultural organizations, Ministry of Sports for sports organizations, etc.). Applications are screened by the ministry's administration, which can contact organizations for further information if needed. They issue a first opinion by July. Screened requests are then examined during a meeting chaired by the minister or a substitute. Organizations are notified between July and October. Payments are generally received in November or December.¹² Once it receives the funding, the organization may spend the money independently.

3.2 Elections in France

National elections. The French political system is dominated by two figures at the national level: the president and the prime minister. The prime minister belongs to the party that has the majority in the lower house. Both the presidential and legislative elections are held every five years, in spring. Over the period studied (2005-2016), the president and the prime minister were from the same party. Figure 1 presents the sequential presidential terms (second row) and legislative terms (third row) between 2000

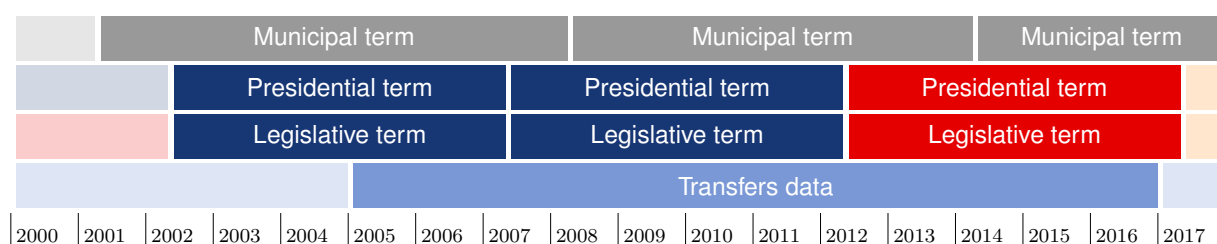
⁹For example, see question 11981 de M. José Evrard (Non inscrit - Pas-de-Calais), Journal Officiel 04122018.

¹⁰Personal income taxes are reduced by 66% of the amount of the contribution and corporate income taxes by 60% of the amount. Fack and Landais (2010) estimate a small price elasticity of individual contributions in France, suggesting that the marginal cost of fund raising is high. Philanthropy in France accounts for 0.32% of GDP, on a par with the figures from other European countries (Sokolowski and Salamon, 2004).

¹¹The first one is a 12-page document requesting detailed past financial statements; a description of the project detailing the goals, the beneficiaries, the geographical area covered, the number of volunteers and paid workers needed; any other public funds received; and an estimated budget for the following year. The second form is for organizations that had received transfers during the previous year. It reports how public money has been spent. Organizations must indicate their achievements, the number of beneficiaries, how the subsidy was used (purchases, wage bill, etc.) and explain any discrepancy between the actual budget and the estimated budget presented when applying for the subsidy. The documents are referenced as cerfa 12156*05 and cerfa 15059*01.

¹²Rapport sur le versement de subventions aux associations dans le cadre du Conseil du développement de la vie associative, March 2007

FIGURE 1: Data and elections timeline



Notes: The bottom row illustrates the time coverage of transfer data (2005-2016). It intersects with three municipal terms: 2001-2008, 2008-2014 and 2014-2020 (first row), with three presidential (second row) and legislative terms (third row): 2002-2007, 2007-2012 and 2012-2017. Presidential and legislative terms in blue (resp. red) correspond to periods when the right (resp. left) is in power.

and 2017. National politics were dominated by the main right-wing party from 2002 to 2012 (in blue), and by the socialist party between 2012 and 2017 (in red).

Municipal elections. France is divided into about 36,000 municipalities, which represent the lowest tier of government. Every six years in March,¹³ voters elect municipal council members, who themselves elect the mayor. There are no term limits for mayors, and some have held office for several decades.¹⁴ There are two distinct voting systems, depending on municipality size. Below 3,500 inhabitants (1,000 since 2014), candidates run individually, and voters must choose as many individual candidates as there are seats in the municipal council. Above 3,500 inhabitants (1,000 since 2014), municipal council members are chosen through a two-round list vote. If, in the first round, a list obtains the absolute majority of votes, it wins. If not, lists that receive at least 10% of votes qualify for a second round, and the list that receives the most votes in the second round wins. In both cases, a majority premium ensures that even if a list wins by a small margin, it will have a large majority of seats in the municipal council and will be in position to choose the mayor. Given the features of the two voting systems, only municipal elections with list voting will be exploited in the discontinuity design.

Campaign finance. Campaign finance is tightly regulated in France. Only political parties and individuals can make monetary contributions to candidates in elections. Individuals' contributions are capped: each person can give a maximum of 7,500 euros to political parties each year. Since a 1995 law, firms and nonprofits cannot make campaign contributions, nor provide goods, services, or any direct or indirect benefit at reduced

¹³The mayoral term starting in 2001 was supposed to end in 2007, but as presidential and legislative elections were also held that year, municipal elections were postponed to 2008. The term lasted 7 years.

¹⁴For instance, Laurent Cathala is currently mayor of Créteil (circa 92,000 inhabitants) and has been in office continuously since 1976.

prices. Nonprofits are allowed to provide information about elections, make comments or endorse a candidate if it does not involve expenditures.¹⁵ Campaign spending is also limited in municipalities with at least 9,000 inhabitants, with different caps for each type of election and municipality size.¹⁶

Parties. France has a multi-party system dominated by a right-wing party (*UMP*, now *Les Républicains*) and a left-wing party (*Parti Socialiste*) during the sample period. Many other parties account for smaller vote shares. To adapt the French setting to a discontinuity design, I consider that candidates aligned with the government party belong to the government party. I consider other politicians, whether belonging to the main opposition party or any other party, to be part of the opposition. Appendix Section D provides details on which list labels are considered left-aligned and right-aligned. In 2016, a new party with a centrist platform, *En Marche*, was created by Emmanuel Macron, then minister in a left-wing government. This new party came to power in 2017 after defeating the *Front National*, a far-right party. From 2016, some incumbent local politicians joined Macron's party, endogenously switching political affiliation. As mayors elected in 2014 campaigned before this party existed, I cannot assign them to either ruling or opposition party. I therefore end my analysis in 2016.

4 Data

Transfers data. I collect new data on transfers from government ministries to nonprofit organizations in France from 2005 to 2016. Data are drawn from a document attached to the Finance bill. Named "*Effort financier de l'Etat en faveur des associations*," it consists of an exhaustive list of all government transfers to nonprofit organizations in a given year as required by a 1962 law. It includes only transfers and excludes public contracts.¹⁷ I have

¹⁵Contrary to the US, where direct spending by firms or nonprofits is unlimited since the *Citizens United v. FEC* 2010 ruling, nonprofits in France cannot spend money to support a candidate, even if it is independent from campaign coordination. Organization leaders can explain why they support or oppose a specific candidate in emails to members, in interviews to the press, etc. However, organizations cannot buy campaign ads or pay employees to campaign. See [Forey \(2016\)](#) for jurisprudence details.

¹⁶For example, a candidate running for mayor in a municipality of 100,000 inhabitants (10,000 inhabitants) can spend no more than 101,200 euros (16,800 euros, respectively). Refer to [Bekkouche et al. \(2022\)](#) for a thorough description of campaign spending rules in France.

¹⁷I additionally gather information on whether each transfer is drawn from the budget line of a member of parliament or senator. Until 2018 in France, the senate and the parliament were endowed with a budget of around 150 million euros that was split among representatives who could use it at their discretion. The money was primarily used to pay for construction and maintenance work, and to fund local authorities or nonprofit organizations (see "*Quel usage a fait votre député de sa réserve parlementaire en 2015 ?*", *Le Monde*, 3/2/2016.) Since the allocation process is different from government transfers, I drop these transfers. Similarly, in the 2016 source document, transfers allocated by local branches of administrations are included, I discard them as the review process differs across regions.

information on each organization’s individual national identifier, known as the *SIREN*. I drop the few cases of organizations without a valid identifier and collapse transfers at the organization-year level. Given that decisions and payments about transfers are made at the end of the year and that presidential, legislative and mayoral elections are held in spring, I consider that transfers of a given year are decided by the new ruling party rather than the incumbent party. My final sample includes 185,506 transfers to 72,353 organizations, accounting for a total of 17.1 billion 2016 euros of transfers.

Establishment data. The *SIRENE* database is an administrative dataset provided by the *INSEE*¹⁸ on the establishments of all for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in France (creation date, legal status, industry and employment). I obtain the location of all the establishments of organizations in the transfers data set. To study the allocation of transfers across municipalities, I focus on local organizations, which are here defined as organizations that have all their establishments in a single municipality.¹⁹

Appendix Table F.1 presents a comparison of the sample of transfers to all organizations in Column (1) and to local organizations in Column (2). Although local organizations account for less than half of the total amount transferred over the period (41.1%), they account for 73.0% of the number of transfers granted, and for 81.3% of organizations.²⁰ Local organizations are slightly younger and are less likely to have employees (28.9% vs. 24.5%).²¹

I use the organizations’ name and mission statement to classify them in two ways.²² First, I group them into 10 theme-based categories with an LDA algorithm. This unsupervised topic modeling method uses word co-occurrence to infer latent topics, and returns the dominant topic of each mission statement. The method is explained in detail

¹⁸National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies.

¹⁹The goal is to focus on organizations whose members and area of operation likely lie within municipal borders. Specifically, for a given year, I consider to be local any organization whose establishments have all been located in a single municipality. I assess how the estimates change when including non-local organizations in Section 6.2.

²⁰Appendix Figure E.2 plots the distribution of transfers to local and non-local organizations.

²¹I also exclude organizations that are classified as secondary education organizations in the *SIRENE* data set. These are organizations whose French activity nomenclature (NAF) code starts with 85.3. The reason is that agricultural secondary education in France is mostly provided by nonprofit organizations that are largely funded by transfers from the Ministry of Agriculture. They are generally located in sparsely populated municipalities but are hardly local in that their outreach far exceeds municipal borders. The median amount transferred to secondary education organizations, when expressed in per-capita terms, is 117 euros, nearly twice the 99th percentile of other local transfers. I discard 1.7% of local transfers, and 1.3% of local organizations. Appendix Figure E.3 contrasts the distributions of transfers to secondary education organizations and to other local organizations.

²²The mission statement of organizations is drawn from *RNA* data (*Répertoire National des Associations*, National Registry of Associations), which I match to *SIRENE* data using organizations’ *WALDEC* identifier or *SIREN* identifier. If these two identifiers are missing, I match organizations based on their name and the municipality in which they are headquartered.

in Appendix B. It should be noted that within a given theme, organizations' demands can vary significantly, and are sometimes opposed.²³

Second, I use 1995 second-round presidential election outcomes at the municipality level to train a LASSO model and identify the terms most typical of organizations created where voters support the right or the left. Considering that organizations' mission statements reflect the ideological preferences of the communities they are created in, those that contain more words typical of right-wing (resp. left-wing) communities' organizations are assumed to be closer to the right (resp. left). From this, I rank the universe of French organizations from least to most right-leaning and assign each to the corresponding percentile. In doing so, I classify organizations in my sample using election data that pre-dates the elections used in the RD design, and considering the population of organizations, meaning that they are not ranked only relative to other organizations that receive transfers.²⁴ Grouping organizations by tertile, I label them congruent if their leaning matches that of the government party, non-congruent if it does not, and moderate if they belong to the middle tertile of the political leaning distribution (details are provided in Section C).

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics on transfers, with organizations divided into groups based on their main topic or political leaning. The first column indicates the median right-leaning percentile for organizations in each category, the second does the same with the mean. The 'professional integration', 'social and cultural centers', and 'sports' categories have organizations considered more left-leaning, while those in the 'heritage preservation' and 'local development' categories are considered more right-leaning. The next columns report the number of transfers, and the mean amount and median amount transferred. The distribution of transfers is skewed, with the median transfer amount being systematically smaller than the mean. The last column reports that the right-wing government (corresponding to years 2005-2011 in the sample) has granted 48.1% of transfers (in value). When in power, the right (resp. the left) provided relatively more support to right-leaning (resp. left-leaning) organizations than to moderate ones.

Electoral data. I obtain the electoral data for the 2008 and 2014 municipal elections from the Interior Ministry, and data for the 2001 municipal elections from [Bekkouche et al. \(2022\)](#). The data includes all municipalities with a two-round list system, i.e. municipalities with at least 3,500 inhabitants for the 2001 and 2008 elections, and with at least 1,000 inhabitants for the 2014 elections. A few municipalities, including Paris, Lyon and

²³For instance, 'environment, nature' includes both hunting organizations and bird protection organizations.

²⁴If the government exclusively granted transfers to moderate organizations, only ranking organizations in the sample would make the left-most and right-most organizations seem partisan whereas, when compared to the population of organizations, in fact they are not.

TABLE 1: Transfers by type of organization (2005-2016, in 2016 euros)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Leaning percentile		Transfers (2016 euros)			
	Median	Mean	Number	Mean	Median	% right gov
Professional integration	20	30.4	8679	118909	15200	23.3
Social and cultural centers	22	30.0	18666	22111	5088	37.2
Sports	23	32.0	16251	20287	2140	73.3
Social welfare	26	36.4	13078	21951	5500	59.4
Family, care	44	45.1	10429	29911	5200	60.2
Creation, arts	48	51.0	25630	39627	6272	35.4
Environment, nature	52	51.1	6297	23864	4480	51.5
Friendly societies	54	54.8	9166	20909	2500	57.6
Local development	73	62.8	12597	141265	16320	54.8
Heritage preservation	74	67.1	9170	56009	4000	73.1
Left-leaning (1 st tertile)	14	15.1	53381	36052	4815	36.1
Moderate (2 nd tertile)	47	47.0	32539	30110	5000	44.3
Right-leaning (3 rd tertile)	84	83.8	39431	72299	6000	57.5
All	41	45.0	132603	46139	5200	48.1

Notes: The table presents descriptive statistics on government transfers to local organizations, by topic (top) and leaning (middle). Organizations in the sector of secondary education are excluded. Topics are obtained using a Latent Dirichlet Allocation based on organizations' stated goals (see Appendix Section B). Organizations' political leaning ranges between 1 and 100, with 1 for the most left-leaning and 100 the most right-leaning organizations (see Appendix Section C). Column 1 indicates the within-category median right-leaning percentile (1-100), and Column 2 the within-group average percentile. Column 6 indicates the share of amounts transferred granted when the right was in power (2005-2011).

Marseille, have a different voting system and are dropped from the analysis as close elections cannot be exploited.²⁵ I code whether the list is from the same political group as the government, i.e. politically aligned. Because some lists are categorized in a broader way (as "diverse left" or "union right" for instance), I provide a full list of labels and their corresponding alignment status in Appendix Section D. Other lists declare no affiliation at all, especially in small municipalities.

Other municipality-level data. I complement the above-mentioned data sources with census data (*INSEE*). These data provide information on the characteristics of municipalities such as total population, population by age groups, by occupational groups, by employment status or by education level. I also use data on household revenues (for municipalities of at least 2,000 inhabitants for confidentiality reasons) and home ownership status. I further compute variables on organization characteristics at the municipality level using the *SIRENE* data (number, decade of creation).

²⁵A number of municipalities have merged over the years and retain a different voting system whereby inhabitants of each former municipality vote for a *secteur*. Within a municipality, each accounts for a designated share of seats in the municipal council.

Matching and final dataset. I match the dataset of government transfers to the establishment data using the *SIREN* identifier. I focus on local organizations to compare the allocation of transfers across municipalities. I compute municipality-level variables such as the total amount received by organizations in the municipality, or the number of recipient organizations. I collapse my dataset at the municipality level, which results in a panel dataset of transfers to organizations at the municipality-year level. I finally match this database to electoral and census data.

5 Empirical strategy

To explore whether transfers are motivated by electoral concerns, I ask whether government politicians favor organizations specifically where the mayor is politically aligned. Transfers may reward organizations whose support helped aligned candidates to win office, or may be used to boost the popularity of the aligned incumbent if voters give them credit for transfers. Close elections provide quasi-random variation in mayors' alignment with the government. At the cutoff, the characteristics of voters and organizations are similar, but the aligned candidate either won or lost. This is important since a government may grant more transfers in electoral strongholds not for electoral motives, but simply because voters there share its preferences, and have created organizations that reflect them.²⁶ Municipalities are also similar, meaning that parties should derive similar benefits when having an ally in office on both sides of the cutoff.

Running variable. The running variable is equal to the vote share of the best-ranked list aligned with the government minus the vote share of the best-ranked list not aligned with the government. In each municipality, let $v^{aligned}$ represent the vote share of the best-ranked government-aligned list, and $v^{unaligned}$ the vote share of the best-ranked government-unaligned list. $v^{aligned}$ and $v^{unaligned}$ correspond to second-round vote shares, except if a list obtained a majority of votes in the first round and no second round took place, in which case first-round vote shares are used. If only one list ran in the last round, if no government-aligned list competed, or if the best-ranked lists obtained exactly the same number of votes, the municipality is dropped for the corresponding municipal term.

For amounts transferred in year t to organizations in municipality m , I consider the last municipal elections in m and denote election time $e(t)$. I define the running variable $margin_{m,e(t)}$ as:

$$margin_{m,e(t)} = v_{m,e(t)}^{aligned} - v_{m,e(t)}^{unaligned} \quad (1)$$

²⁶Notably, there are no term limits for elected officials in municipal elections in France. The fact that term limits are differentially binding for government-aligned candidates and candidates from other parties is therefore not a concern in the present setting.

By construction, $margin_{m,e(t)}$ is positive if the winning candidate in municipality m belongs to the government party, negative otherwise. $aligned_{m,e(t)}$ is the treatment indicator; it is equal to one if $margin_{m,e(t)}$ is greater than zero, zero otherwise. In my sample, any municipality with a right-wing mayor between 2005 and 2011 is considered aligned (under the presidencies of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy). Municipalities headed by a left-wing mayor between 2012 and 2016 are considered aligned. I provide more details on party alignment and on the alignment margin in Appendix Section D.

Main specification. I use the following specification:

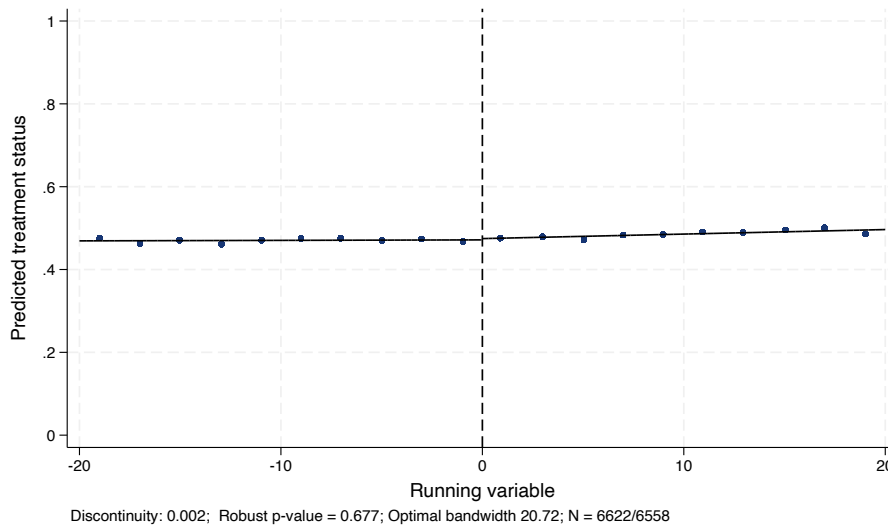
$$y_{m,t} = \alpha + \beta aligned_{m,e(t)} + \delta_1 aligned_{m,e(t)} margin_{m,e(t)} + \delta_2 margin_{m,e(t)} + \epsilon_{m,t} \quad (2)$$

where $y_{m,t}$ is the per-capita amount granted by the government to organizations aggregated at the municipality m level at time t . $margin_{m,e(t)}$ is the alignment margin, and $aligned_{m,e(t)}$ indicates whether m is aligned based on the results of the last elections. $\epsilon_{m,t}$ is the error term. As several years of data are pooled together, standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. The coefficient of interest is β . It reflects the causal effect of the mayor's alignment on how much organizations in municipality m receive at time t . If the government grants additional transfers in aligned municipalities, but also in unaligned municipalities for electoral reasons, β will capture the net of these two effects, and its sign will indicate which one dominates. Following Calonico et al. (2019), I non-parametrically estimate the coefficient of interest using local linear regressions. I use the mean squared error optimal bandwidths selection procedure proposed by Calonico et al. (2014). This procedure is data-driven, implying that bandwidth size varies with the outcome under consideration.

Identifying assumption and robustness. The identifying assumption is that the win margin of the government party candidates cannot be precisely manipulated. Appendix Figure E.4 plots the distribution of alignment margins. 403 distinct electoral races were decided by a margin below 2 percentage points and no discontinuity is visible. The density test from Cattaneo et al. (2018) detects no jump at the threshold (p -value = 0.634). The main implication of the identifying assumption is that municipalities' characteristics are continuous at the threshold. I run a general test of imbalance by predicting treatment status with all the covariates in Appendix Table F.2, and testing for a discontinuity in the predicted treatment at the threshold. Figure 2 shows no discontinuity. The discontinuity estimate is very close to zero and not statistically significant, which supports the idea that municipalities' pre-treatment characteristics are balanced.²⁷ I further run placebo

²⁷Appendix Table F.2 reports the regression discontinuity estimates using Equation 2 separately for each covariate.

FIGURE 2: General balance test



Notes: The figure plots the predicted treatment status using covariates shown in Appendix Table F.2 against the running variable (alignment margin). Dots are local averages of the outcome. Continuous lines are straight lines fitted to raw data separately to each side of zero. The non-parametric RD estimate of Equation 2 estimated following Calonico et al. (2014) along with the corresponding p -value, the MSE-optimal bandwidth and the effective number of observations are reported at the bottom of the figure.

tests and show that alignment has no impact on the transfer amounts received during the previous term. Appendix Table F.3 reports the results. Overall, these checks lend support to the validity design.

6 Results

6.1 Main results

I first estimate the impact of mayors' alignment status on how much organizations receive. Table 2 reports regression discontinuity estimates from Equation 2. The outcome variable is the amount received by organizations in a municipality, expressed in 2016 euros per inhabitant. Municipal population is measured in pre-election years. Government officials channel more funds to ideologically close organizations where the mayor is a political ally. They receive an additional 1.39 euros per capita each year (s.e. = 0.352), compared to 1.77 euros in barely unaligned municipalities (+79%). Alignment does not significantly impact the amounts transferred to moderate and non-congruent organizations. The absolute values of these point estimates sum to 1.60 euros, with 87% being due to congruent organizations. Over a six-year term, congruent organizations receive +8.35 euros per inhabitant. As a benchmark, government party candidates in municipal

TABLE 2: Effect of alignment on transfers to nonprofit organizations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Amounts transferred to organizations (in 2016 euros per inhab.)					
	Mean (left)	Discontinuity	S.E.	p -value	Obs.	Bandw.
Congruent org.	1.77	1.392	(0.352)	0.000	30647	16.2
Moderate org.	0.88	-0.0619	(0.148)	0.569	30647	11.4
Non-congruent org.	1.44	-0.150	(0.186)	0.647	30647	17.7
All organizations	4.11	1.082	(0.477)	0.026	30647	14.4

Notes: This table reports regression discontinuity estimates corresponding to Equation 2 using the amounts granted to local nonprofit organizations expressed in 2016 euros per capita as outcomes. Organizations are classified by ideological leaning following the procedure detailed in Appendix Section C. Column 1 reports the mean of the outcome variable in municipalities where the aligned candidate lost by fewer than 2 percentage points. Column 2 reports regression estimates from Calonico et al. (2014). Robust nearest-neighbor standard errors clustered at the municipality level and the corresponding p -value are in Columns 3 and 4. Column 5 indicates the number of observations, and Column 6 the MSE-optimal bandwidth.

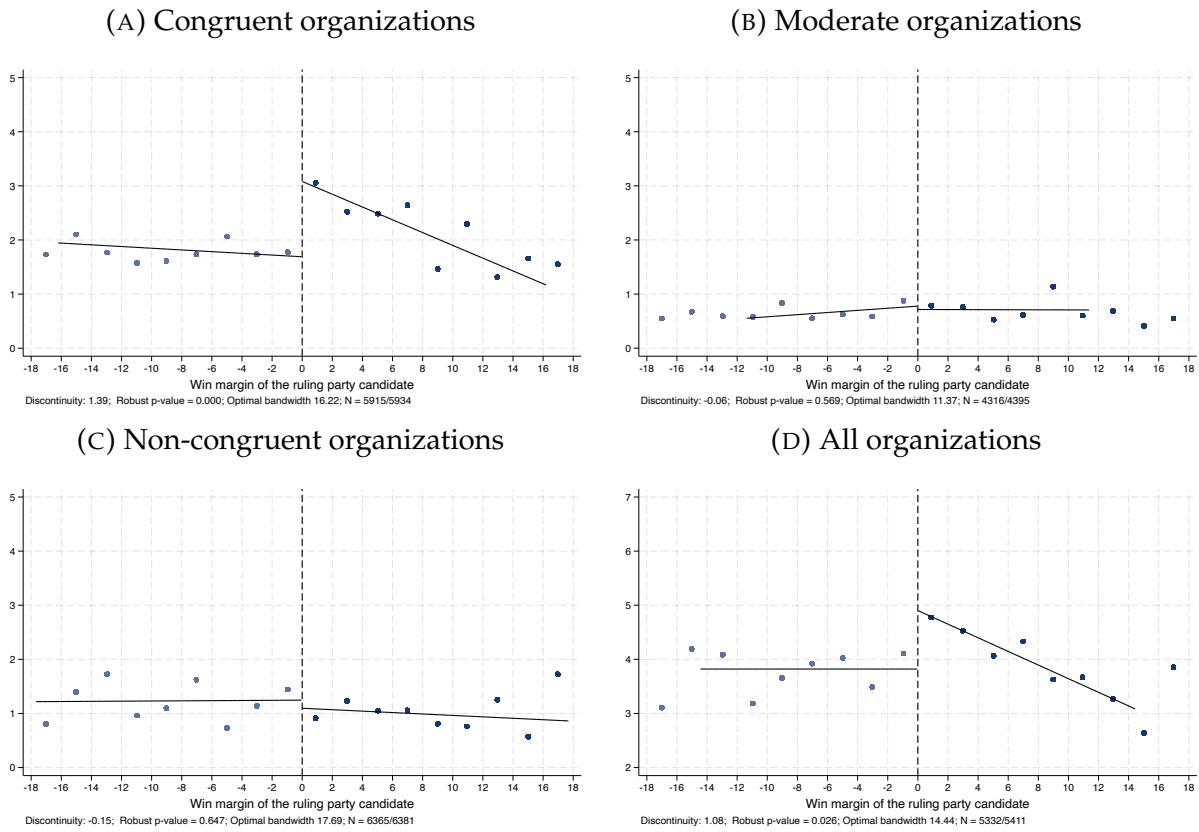
elections spend on average 1.10 euros per capita on campaigning.²⁸ When pooling all the organizations, the discontinuity estimate is 1.08 (s.e. = 0.477), compared to 4.11 euros in opposition municipalities (+26%). I further explore whether this effect is due to a larger number of organizations benefiting from government transfers. Results are presented in Appendix Table F.4. The number of organizations receiving transfers is not significantly larger, irrespective of ideological leaning. The effect on transferred amounts is therefore mainly driven by a set number of organizations receiving larger amounts. Taken together, these results indicate that government officials take into account who is locally in power when granting transfers, primarily to the benefit of congruent organizations in aligned municipalities.

Figure 3 is the visual complement of Table 2.²⁹ A jump in regression lines is visible at zero for congruent organizations. No discontinuity is visible for moderate and non-congruent organizations. Alignment-induced transfers appear to be concentrated where government party candidates won by a small margin, potentially reflecting the fact that government officials prioritize organizations where local co-party politicians are the most electorally vulnerable. Appendix Figure E.8 presents similar plots for the number of organizations receiving transfers. In line with the results reported above, no discontinuity is visible.

²⁸Comparatively, using panel data and variation in committee assignment in the US Congress, Bertrand et al. (2020) find that about 7.1 percent of corporate charitable giving is politically motivated. They estimate an average treatment effect while I estimate a local average treatment effect in highly contested districts. Even so, the coefficients they estimate are similar where elections were won by a narrow margin and in election years.

²⁹Appendix Figure E.5 shows the same plots as Figure 3 but using wider bins (3 and 2.5 percentage-point wide bins, respectively) while Appendix Figure E.6 reports the same plots but using narrower bins (1.5 and 1 percentage-point wide bins, respectively). In Appendix Figure E.7, I additionally report plots similar to Figure 3 but using a narrower range of elections ([-10pp,10pp]).

FIGURE 3: Effect of alignment on the transfer amounts to organizations, in 2016 euros per inhabitant



Notes: Dots are local averages of the outcome: the municipality-level per-capita amount transferred to local organizations. Organizations are split based on their ideological congruence with the government party (refer to Section C for details). The running variable is the win margin of the aligned candidate. Continuous lines are straight lines fitted to raw data within the MSE-optimal bandwidth separately to each side of zero using a triangular kernel. At the bottom of each graph, I report the non-parametric RD estimate of Equation 2 estimated following Calonico et al. (2014) along with the corresponding p -value, the optimal bandwidth and the effective number of observations.

To test whether the effect of alignment on transfers to organizations can be extrapolated away from the cutoff, I implement the procedure by Angrist and Rokkanen (2015) on the $[-15pp, 15pp]$ alignment margin window (for other implementations in a close election setting, see Hainmueller et al., 2015; Marx et al., 2022). The underlying assumption – the conditional independence assumption (CIA) – is that potential outcomes can be considered mean independent of the running variable conditional on a set of covariates for a given window around the cutoff. Appendix Figure E.9 illustrates the CIA tests. When plotting residuals against the alignment margin, slope coefficients are not significantly different from zero. Appendix Figure E.10 plots estimates of expected potential outcomes under the CIA. Visually, both for congruent organizations and all organizations, the effect of alignment is larger for observations close to the threshold. Appendix Table F.5 reports two CIA-based estimators: one building on Kline (2011) and the other on Hirano et al. (2003). For congruent organizations, the extrapolated effects of align-

ment are about half the magnitude of those estimated at the cutoff with [Calonico et al. \(2014\)](#). Taken together, these findings support the idea that alignment-driven transfers concentrate in the most competitive municipalities.

6.2 Robustness

I first show that my results are robust to how organizations are split into congruence groups. Appendix Table [F.6](#) presents the main results, with organizations divided into two groups – splitting along the median – and into four groups – splitting along quartiles. Appendix Figures [E.11](#) and [E.12](#) present the corresponding plots. The results are qualitatively very similar: congruent organizations disproportionately benefit. When split into two groups, only congruent organizations benefit (+1.28, s.e. = 0.367); non-congruent ones do not (-0.110, s.e. = 0.226). When split into four groups, the effect is driven by strongly congruent organizations (+1.24, s.e. = 0.290). Weakly and strongly non-congruent organizations do not receive extra transfers.

I also show that the results are robust to a number of specification changes. I first check that they are robust to the choice of bandwidth. For each outcome, I estimate the effect of alignment for 20 alternative bandwidths ranging between .5 and 1.5 times the optimal bandwidth under the local linear specification. Appendix Figure [E.13](#) plots the point estimates and 90% confidence intervals. Estimates remain positive and statistically significant for a large range of bandwidths when studying the amounts transferred to congruent organizations and all organizations. Second, I test the sensitivity of the results to the inclusion of pre-election control variables. Under the identifying assumption, all pre-election covariates should be smooth at the cutoff, and their inclusion should not change estimates. Appendix Table [F.7](#) Panel A reports the results. Point estimates are very similar: they are slightly larger for congruent organizations and when pooling all organizations. I next assess whether my results are robust to the use of a quadratic rather than a linear fit and to the use of a uniform kernel. Appendix Table [F.7](#) Panels B and C report estimates, respectively. In both cases, the estimates are very similar to the baseline ones.

As France is a multiparty system, the aligned list may win or lose against a list that is not affiliated with the main opposition party, but rather with a radical left, centrist, radical right, or no party. Appendix Tables [D.1](#), [D.2](#) and [D.3](#) provide details on the political affiliation of each list label, along with the associated number of lists competing. Appendix Table [F.7](#) Panel D reports estimates using only municipalities where the best-ranked opposition candidate is affiliated to the main opposition party. It excludes races where, for instance, a socialist list (left) lost to a communist list (radical left). Appendix Figure [E.14](#) presents the corresponding plots for this set of elections. Results are very

similar with +1.49 euros for congruent organizations.

I next test the robustness of my results to extending the analysis to non-local organizations. Considering all organizations, I assign the transfers that an organization receives to the municipality where it is headquartered. Appendix Table F.8 presents the results. The coefficients are less precisely estimated; this imprecision comes from the fact that some municipalities host the headquarters of multi-municipality organizations that receive very large amounts.³⁰ The coefficient for congruent organizations is close to the baseline one and significant, while the estimates are not significant for moderate and non-congruent organizations.

I additionally explore whether estimates could be driven by outlying amounts. To this end, I winsorize transferred amounts at the 95 and 99 percent levels respectively before aggregating them at the municipality level. Results are presented in Appendix Table F.9. For congruent organizations, the discontinuity estimates imply a 48% increase when winsorizing at the 95 percent level, and an 82% increase when winsorizing at the 99 percent level. While the magnitudes slightly differ from those implied by the baseline estimate, they document similar patterns and the estimates are significant in both cases.

I finally examine whether discontinuity estimates could be driven by differential organization creation rates across aligned and unaligned municipalities. I estimate the main specification using transfers to organizations older than six years (i.e. organizations that were not created during the mayoral or presidential term) as a dependent variable. Appendix Table F.10 Panel B presents the results. Point estimates are very similar. Alignment-induced transfers are not driven by recently created organizations.

6.3 Partisan vs. efficiency motives

Government officials grant more transfers to organizations located in a municipality headed by a political ally, specifically if it is electorally at risk. However, this pattern may arise even when politicians do not care about the electoral fate of local political allies. First, local aligned politicians may coordinate local organizations more efficiently.³¹ Mayors may work more efficiently with organization leaders sharing the same views, and government officials may work better with aligned mayors. In this case, alignment would bring more transfers not for electoral motives, but rather for reasons of efficiency. Second, local politicians may help screen efficient organizations.

³⁰For instance, the AFPA (*Association pour la formation professionnelle des adultes*, a professional training organization), had its headquarters in Montreuil, a 107,000 inhabitant municipality close to Paris. It obtained 1.2 billion euros in governmental transfers between 2005 and 2016. Scaled by the number of inhabitants, this organization received on average 972 euros per capita each year.

³¹Colonnelli et al. (2022) and Colonnelli et al. (2020) document strong assortative matching by political views in Brazilian private firms and bureaucracies.

TABLE 3: Heterogeneity by campaign spending and transfer timing

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Mean (left)	Discontinuity	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value	Obs.	Bandw.
<i>Panel A. Timing of transfers</i>						
... pre-election years	3.83	2.295	(0.983)	0.013	8362	9.99
... other years	4.20	0.911	(0.518)	0.135	22285	16.2
<i>Panel B. Ruling party campaign spending, euros per capita</i>						
... above median	8.78	4.858	(1.220)	0.000	3942	11.0
... below median	8.37	-1.435	(1.595)	0.345	3933	22.7
<i>Panel C. Share of ruling party campaign spending</i>						
... above median	8.67	2.324	(1.455)	0.066	3939	15.1
... below median	8.71	4.894	(1.657)	0.004	3936	11.5
<i>Panel D. Whether campaign spending is capped</i>						
... capped	7.62	2.264	(0.912)	0.008	10694	10.7
... not capped	2.09	0.830	(0.629)	0.220	19953	16.1

Notes: The table shows the regression discontinuity estimate of the effect of having a government party mayor elected on the municipality-level amount received by all local organizations, in 2016 euros per inhabitant. Estimates are computed for four pairs of sub-samples: last two years of the mayoral term vs. other years in Panel A; municipalities where the government party candidate spent above vs. below median in Panel B; municipalities where the government party candidate spending share was above vs. below median in Panel C; and municipalities with at least 9,000 inhabitants vs. fewer than 9,000 inhabitants in Panel D. Other notes as in Table 2.

The results do not seem to support such explanations. First, the effect is essentially driven by aligned municipalities where the government party candidate narrowly won. If local organizations in aligned municipalities are better coordinated or selected, then a government concerned with efficiency should increase them in all aligned municipalities, not only where elections were close. Second, I study the timing of transfers, particularly whether alignment-driven transfers are larger at the end of the mayoral term, when the incumbent is up for re-election. I look separately at the last two years of mayoral terms (2006 and 2007, 2012 and 2013) and at other years. Panel A of Table 3 reports the results. Alignment-driven transfers are more than twice as large in pre-election years as in other years (+2.30 euros vs. +0.91 euros). Again, if alignment was driving larger transfers only for efficiency motives, it is unclear why that would be the case mostly at the end of mayors' terms. Instead, the timing of alignment-driven transfers seems to leverage retrospective voters' myopia, as documented in the literature on political budget cycles (Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya, 2004, for instance). Addressing the screening explanation more specifically, I find that my results are not driven by young organizations (created less than six years ago), even though they are precisely the ones that have the shorter track record and generate the greatest uncertainty (Appendix Table F.10, Panel A). Finally, if the role of local politicians is to inform the central government about which organizations are most efficient, then defeated government party candidates – who are

part of the municipal council and are well informed about local political and associational matters – might also play this role. From this perspective, the acquiring of information on organizations’ effectiveness through local elected officials alone cannot explain why organizations in aligned districts receive more transfers.

An alternative explanation is that government officials grant transfers to local organizations to tilt elections in favor of local political allies. The timing of alignment-driven transfers and the fact that they are concentrated in narrowly won municipalities support this idea. I further explore this hypothesis with campaign spending data from [Bekkouche et al. \(2022\)](#). If transfers to local organizations help local politicians secure re-election, akin to campaign spending, then they should be targeted wherever the ruling party candidate spent more on campaigning. I use the campaign expenditure amounts spent in the last elections and split municipalities according to the government party candidate’s expenditure amounts.³² Panel B of Table 3 reports the results. Notably, whether expenditures were above or below median, the discontinuity is estimated for municipalities where electoral races were equally tight. Estimates indicate that alignment-driven transfers concentrate where an aligned candidate had an above-median spending (+4.86 euros). I also explore whether effects are larger where other candidates spent competitively. I measure the top ruling party candidate’s spending as a share of all candidates’ spending in the last elections. Results are in Panel C. Estimates tend to be larger where relative spending was below median. Potentially, alignment-driven transfers are targeted at races where the aligned candidate was at a relative disadvantage. Finally, I test whether transfers are disproportionately targeted at municipalities where campaign spending is capped, with the idea that if transfers increase re-election chances, they might specifically be needed there. Spending is limited in municipalities of at least 9,000 inhabitants, but not in smaller ones.³³ Panel D of Table 3 reports estimates for municipalities whose population is above or below this population threshold. Alignment-driven transfers appear to be concentrated where spending is capped (+2.26 euro).³⁴ Taken together, the results support the idea that financial assistance given to local nonprofit organizations because of alignment is driven by electoral motives. It is concentrated in municipalities headed by a political ally who was elected by a small margin and where the party has spent substantial amounts to secure the seat.

³²The estimation sample includes only municipalities where campaign finance data is available, i.e. only municipalities with at least 9,000 inhabitants. If several government-aligned candidate compete, I use the spending of the best-ranked aligned candidate.

³³[Broberg et al. \(2022\)](#) use this discontinuity to study the impact of campaign spending cap and reimbursement schemes.

³⁴Of course, more populated municipalities might differ from others in many other aspects. The partisan returns of having a political ally in a large, as opposed to a small, municipality might be higher. The amount received in barely unaligned municipalities also tends to be higher for larger municipalities. We should therefore be careful not to over-interpret this result.

7 Mechanisms

In this section, and building on the conceptual framework introduced in Section 2, I discuss two ways in which transfers to organizations may influence voters in local elections. The first emphasizes voters crediting politicians for transfers, while the second centers on a reciprocal exchange whereby organizations receive transfers and provide electoral support.³⁵

7.1 Credit attribution

The first mechanism centers on voters crediting politicians for transfers to organizations. They may credit the government party, potentially boosting the local aligned candidate's popularity, or the incumbent, if they are not properly informed about the origin of funds. Voters rewarding candidates when organizations receive more funding sets incentives for the central government to distribute funds in a tactical way.³⁶

Alignment and election competitiveness. The first prediction for this mechanism is that, if voters credit local incumbents, organizations in aligned municipalities should receive strictly more than otherwise similar organizations in opposition municipalities. This pattern has been documented in the context of investment grants, which are disproportionately allocated to aligned local governments.³⁷ My results indeed show that organizations in barely aligned municipalities receive additional funding.

If voters credit the ruling party, government politicians strike a balance in opposition municipalities between boosting the party image, which may benefit its local candidate,

³⁵Even though organizations are forbidden by law from making campaign contributions, politicians may still expect organization members to make campaign contributions in return for transfers. For instance, [Mironov and Zhuravskaya \(2016\)](#) document that firms winning procurement contracts in Russia funnel funds to politicians around the time of elections. One could imagine that organization employees use funds to increase their wages and, in turn, contribute to electoral campaigns as individuals, which is allowed. However, this seems implausible. First, organizations would need to pay employer and employee payroll taxes: between 21 and 23% of gross wages and between 25 and 42% of gross wages, respectively. Next, wages of non-profit organizations' board members are tightly regulated. Except in specific cases, and provided that at least two thirds of the board agrees and that wages are made public, board members' wages cannot exceed 0.75 times the minimum wage. In addition, individual campaign contributions are capped at 4,600 euros per election, which limits individuals' ability to contribute. Finally, organizations need to report on how they have used past transfers if they want to ask for funding again. Spending the funds on wage increases likely decreases their chances of receiving transfers in the future. Overall, although I cannot rule it out completely, it seems unlikely that politicians seek to obtain individual campaign contributions, or that this is what drives the results.

³⁶[Healy and Malhotra \(2013\)](#) review the retrospective voting literature and discuss attribution errors. [Golden and Min \(2013\)](#) review the literature on distributive politics.

³⁷See for instance [Levitt and Snyder \(1995\)](#), [Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro \(2008\)](#), [Arulampalam et al. \(2009\)](#), [Brollo and Nannicini \(2012\)](#), [Albouy \(2013\)](#), [Bracco et al. \(2015\)](#), [Muraközy and Telegdy \(2016\)](#) or [Curto-Grau et al. \(2018\)](#).

and preventing the incumbent from taking credit. Depending on which of the two considerations dominates, organizations in swing unaligned municipalities should benefit from additional transfers or suffer cuts relative to safer ones. To explore this, I measure the difference in average transfers between swing and safer municipalities. More precisely, I estimate the following specification:

$$y_{m,t} = \alpha + \delta 1(|margin_{m,e(t)}| < 5pp) + \epsilon_{m,t} \quad (3)$$

I do this separately for aligned and unaligned municipalities. The coefficient of interest, δ , indicates whether swing aligned (resp. unaligned) municipalities receive different amounts from safer aligned (resp. unaligned) municipalities. Competitive municipalities differ from safer ones in many aspects, so differences in amounts transferred should be interpreted with caution. For this reason, I further explore the timing of transfers and estimate differences between swing and safer municipalities for each year of the mayoral term. Larger differences around the time of elections could possibly be due to electoral concerns.

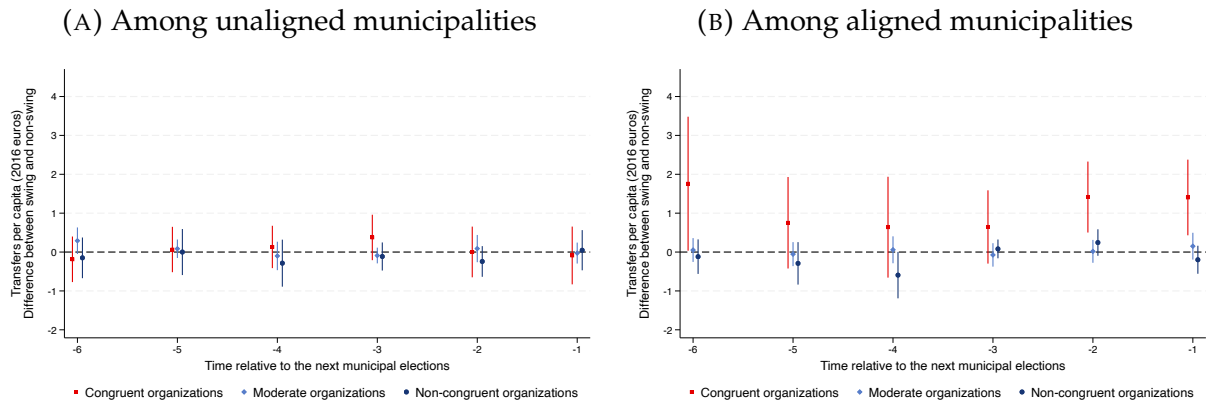
Figure 4 reports the results. Congruent organizations in competitive aligned municipalities receive larger transfers than those in safer aligned municipalities, especially at the end of the term. In contrast, organizations in unaligned swing municipalities receive the same amounts as organizations in safer ones, both during and at the end of the term. This suggests that organizations in swing unaligned municipalities experience no transfer cuts, nor increases. This may be because the cost of granting additional transfers perfectly cancels the benefits. To further explore this, I ask whether a different pattern is visible in municipalities where the government party is more popular, as efforts to improve its image may be less needed there. I proxy the government party's popularity using its vote share in the last presidential elections, and split my sample between municipalities where it obtained an above- or below-median score.³⁸ Appendix Figure E.15 shows that organizations in narrowly unaligned municipalities receive similar amounts as organizations in safer unaligned municipalities, even where the ruling party is more popular.

Overall, I find no evidence that organizations in swing unaligned municipalities suffer transfer cuts, a prediction of distributive politics models where only the incumbent claims credit, or at least claims more credit than the government party.³⁹ I also find no evidence that they receive additional funds, which would be expected if voters mainly credit the government party. One potential explanation is that the ruling party and the local incumbent are credited in equal proportions. Another is that cutting or granting

³⁸I use 1995, 2007 and 2012 second-round presidential election outcomes at the municipality level to proxy for the government party's local popularity during the 2001, 2008 and 2014 municipal terms.

³⁹See Arulampalam et al. (2009), Brollo and Nannicini (2012), or Curto-Grau et al. (2018).

FIGURE 4: Differences in amounts transferred between swing and safer municipalities



Notes: Panel A plots estimates of the difference in means between swing (race decided by a margin below 5 percentage points) and non-swing municipalities whose mayor is not aligned with the government party. Estimates correspond to δ in Equation 3. The outcome variable is the per-capita amount received by respectively congruent, moderate and non-congruent organizations. The difference in means is estimated separately for each time relative to the next mayoral elections (-6 is the first year of the mayoral term, and -1 the last). Vertical bars are 90% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Panel B reports similar differences in means between swing and non-swing municipalities, but using the sample of aligned municipalities.

transfers in unaligned municipalities has no impact on the incumbent or the aligned candidate popularity; however, this would not be in line with a credit attribution mechanism.

Organization targeting. The second prediction associated with a tactical distribution mechanism is that, when in power, both the left and the right target the same organizations.⁴⁰ These are organizations that are valued by a broader range of voters as well as by responsive voters.

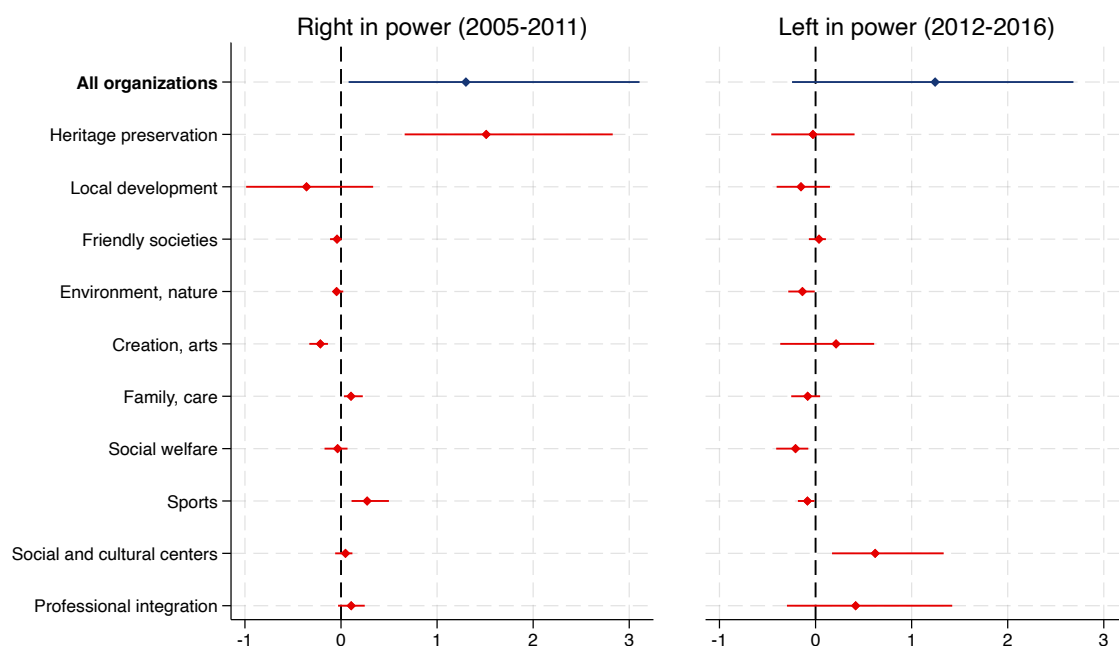
I first evaluate whether the left and the right follow symmetric strategies and target the same groups. First, estimates in Table 2 already provided some evidence at odds with this prediction. Organizations that benefit from alignment-driven transfers are primarily those that are ideologically congruent with the government party. This implies that the two parties, when in power, do not target the same groups.

I next ask whether both the left and the right support organizations whose mission is similar. Indeed, they may have different partisan leanings, but still have very similar beneficiaries (e.g. religious vs. secular food banks). Figure 5 reports discontinuity estimates for organizations in each topic group when under the right, and when under the left.⁴¹ Topics are ordered based on political leaning, with most right-leaning categories at the top. The results show that the right-wing government mainly favors organiza-

⁴⁰This prediction is in line with Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) and Dixit and Londregan (1996).

⁴¹Appendix Figure E.17 reports the corresponding estimates obtained when focusing on left-right races.

FIGURE 5: Heterogeneity by organizations' main topic



Total deviations: 2.7 under the right, 2.0 under the left. Share of positive deviations: 75% under the right, 65% under the left.

Notes: The figure plots estimates of the impact of alignment on the amount transferred to organizations by topic categories. Refer to Appendix Section B for details on the topic clustering procedure. The effect of alignment is estimated separately for years when a right-wing government was in power and when a left-wing government was in power. Control variables reported in F.2 are included (except population). They are measured in pre-election years. Each diamond represents the point estimate of a separate local linear regression. Horizontal bars are 90% cluster robust confidence intervals. Topics are sorted on the median ideological leaning of organizations in the topic group (right-leaning groups at the top, left leaning groups at the bottom).

tions concerned with heritage preservation, which tend to lean right (see Table 1). The left appears to favor social and cultural centers and, possibly, organizations that focus on professional integration, which are two types of organizations that lean left.⁴² It does not seem that the left and the right fund organizations that have distinct leanings but provide goods that are close substitutes, or to similar beneficiaries.

Third, I ask whether politicians target funds to bipartisan organizations (funded by both the left and the right), or to partisan ones (funded by either the left or the right). Bipartisan organizations, as they are defined here, are valued by a diverse range of politicians, and possibly voters. They are likely less partisan, or likely to provide goods suf-

⁴²Some groups appear to receive less funding due to alignment. This is the case for 'creation, arts' under the right; and 'social welfare' under the left. Those groups are not obviously opposed in political terms: parties, when in power, do not seem to specifically cut transfers to opposed groups. Negative deviations account for 25% (under the right) and 35% (under the left) of total deviations. They may be due to the imprecision of estimates (some negative estimates become somewhat closer to zero when including controls, as shown in Appendix Figure E.16), to the political leaning of the opponent (some estimates change when focusing on left-right races, Appendix Figure E.17), and to politicians crowding out resources from some organizations in favor of others.

ficiently valuable for politicians across the aisle to acknowledge their merit. This should make them ideal targets for tactical distribution. I specifically study the 2008 mayoral term, in the middle of which a new government party gained power. Nicolas Sarkozy (right) was defeated in the 2012 presidential elections and replaced by François Hollande (left) at the beginning of the year. Municipalities that had initially been aligned became unaligned.⁴³ Taking 2011, the last year before presidential elections, as a reference year, I compute $\Delta y_{m,t} = y_{m,t} - y_{m,2011}$. $\Delta y_{m,2013}$ is zero if organizations in m receive the same amounts in 2011 and 2013. Using the right-wing candidate's win margin as the running variable, I estimate the following specification:

$$\Delta y_{m,t} = \alpha + \beta \text{right}_m + \delta_1 \text{right}_m \text{right margin}_m + \delta_2 \text{right margin}_m + \gamma X_m + \epsilon_{m,t} \quad (4)$$

where right_m indicates whether a right-aligned list won in 2008 in municipality m , right margin_m is the win margin of the right. X_m is a vector of pre-determined controls. The β coefficient is expected to be close to zero from 2008 to 2010 if the effect of a right-wing mayor on transfers is stable over time under the right-wing government. It will become negative in 2012 and 2013 if organizations in right-wing municipalities witness a decrease in transfers after the left-wing government wins.

Figure 6 reports the results.⁴⁴ Plots on the left present estimates from separate regressions, one for each year, for bipartisan organizations (Panel A) and partisan organizations (Panel B). Estimates using respectively 2008-2010 and 2012-2013 averages of the dependent variable are reported in the upper part of the figure, along with the associated robust p -value. Figures on the right plot the change in transfers by type of organizations between the period before (2008-2011) and the period after (2012-2013) against the right-wing candidate's win margin. Having a right-wing mayor does not change how bipartisan organizations are funded, but it does substantially decrease the amount received by partisan organizations when the left reaches power. Organizations only valued by the right receive extra transfers under a right-wing government. Those transfers end when the left reaches power; they are not compensated by transfers to organizations that are only valued by the left. Politicians' ideology therefore strongly influences their choice of who to target. They essentially support core constituencies. The results go against the idea that politicians from both parties target the same organizations. They do not cater to weakly partisan or moderate groups, nor do they support the activity of broadly recognized organizations.

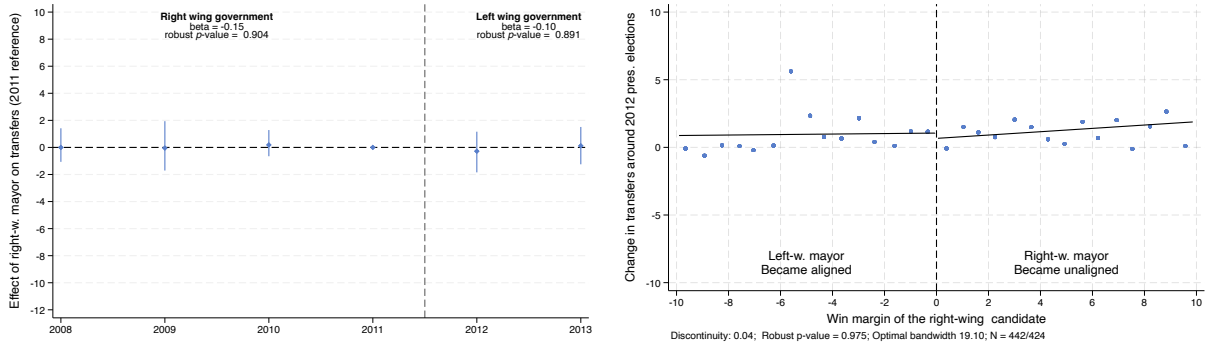
The government party may however still support partisan rather than moderate or-

⁴³I focus on municipalities in which the two front-runners in the last elections were either left-wing (aligned with Hollande) or right-wing (aligned with Sarkozy). If a right-wing mayor narrowly won (lost) in 2008, the municipality was initially aligned (unaligned) and becomes unaligned (aligned) after Hollande's victory.

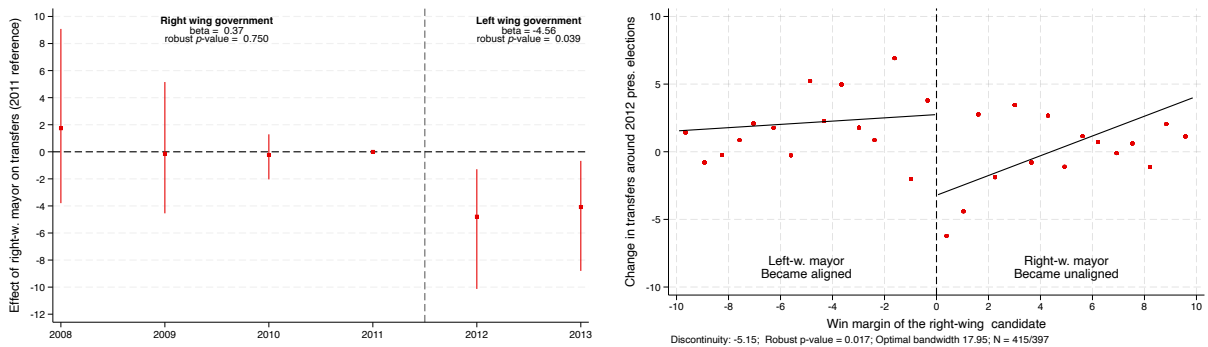
⁴⁴Appendix Figure E.18 reports the same results, but using a specification without controls.

FIGURE 6: Composition effects around 2012 government change

(A) Among organizations funded at least once by both the left and the right



(B) Among organizations funded by only the left or only the right



Notes: Panel A considers transfers to organizations funded by both the left and the right between 2008 and 2013. Panel B considers transfers to organizations funded by either the left or the right between 2008 and 2013. Plots on the left-hand side report the point estimates from Equation 4 with 90% confidence intervals. Point estimates regressions using 2008-2010 and 2012-2013 means are reported on top of the figure, along with the robust p -value. Pre-determined control variables are included in the specification. Appendix Figure E.18 reports the corresponding figure when not using controls. Figures on the right-hand side plot changes in transfers between 2008-2010 and 2012-2013 against the right-wing list's win margin.

organizations in the context of a credit attribution mechanism. First, politicians may seek to mobilize their base rather than persuade swing voters. This persuasion channel is emphasized in the conceptual framework; it implies that both parties should target the same groups.⁴⁵ But transfers may instead be targeted at partisan groups if these groups credit politicians for transfers and mobilize in response. In this case, the government party should cut transfers to opposition organizations in unaligned municipalities to prevent the local opponent from taking credit. This means that opposition organizations should receive more funding in narrowly aligned municipalities than in unaligned ones. However, as shown in Table 2, this is not what I find. I also do not find that alignment-driven transfers are larger in municipalities with below-median turnout, i.e. in municipalities where many voters are demobilized (see Appendix Table F.11).

⁴⁵Indeed, the conceptual framework assumes that voters choose between two candidates, but not whether to vote.

Next, voters may be more likely to credit a politician for funding an organization that matches her ideology. For instance, voters would more easily credit a left-wing politician for transfers to left-leaning organizations. Again, opposition organizations should receive strictly less in opposition municipalities than in aligned municipalities, which is not what I find. Additionally, when compared to organizations in safer unaligned municipalities, congruent (resp. opposed) organizations in swing unaligned municipalities should receive more (resp. fewer) transfers than moderate organizations. The results presented in Figure 4 do not support this view.

Overall, I find limited support for the idea that politicians tactically grant funds to organizations in the hope that voters will credit the incumbent or the government party and vote in consequence. Most alignment-driven cases of misallocation in the literature concern investment grants to local governments used to fund infrastructure work.⁴⁶ In contrast, transfers to organizations may not be visible enough for voters to notice, or may not be credited to elected officials. Voters may have no knowledge of the resources organizations have at their disposal, let alone how these have fluctuated in the last term. Even if they do notice a change, they may not immediately assume that elected officials are behind it, as it could also be due to organizations' fundraising initiatives. In line with this, Bueno (2018) argues that voters in Brazil do not credit local incumbents for the services provided by non-state welfare providers receiving funds from the central government.⁴⁷

7.2 Reciprocal exchange

The second mechanism illustrated by the conceptual framework involves a reciprocal exchange between government party politicians and organizations. Organizations provide electoral support, while the government party gives financial support.⁴⁸ Government party politicians can promise transfers,⁴⁹ and follow through on their promise only if the organization has been supportive. The fact that transfers are conditioned on support makes this exchange clientelistic (Hicken, 2011). Transfers may further be conditioned

⁴⁶Muraközy and Telegdy (2016) show that alignment-driven distortions primarily involve grants to local governments that fund visible projects.

⁴⁷I do not find that the government increases welfare services provision in barely unaligned municipalities by shifting resources toward non-state providers there. Possibly, this is because there is only limited substitutability between the services provided by non-profits and those provided by local governments. Also, the transfers studied here are not payments for service delivery (see Section 3.1 for details).

⁴⁸A former mayor explained in an interview that "It's a daily occurrence for associations to come and ask for things, implying that they might support you." (in Béatrice Bouniol and Gauthier Vaillant, "Les maires face à la tentation du clientélisme," *La Croix*, 02/07/2020)

⁴⁹For example, a government party politician running in municipal elections met with an emergency accommodation association that was experiencing funding difficulties. He said, "I don't know if I can get a grant for you, but I'm going to fight for it. I'll make a call to the Ministry of Housing." (In Claire Bommelaer, "En campagne, Wauquiez porte-parole de lui-même", *Le Figaro*, 02/26/2008).

on electoral success, such that it is in the organization's own interest for the aligned candidate to be elected, in the spirit of self-enforcing models of clientelism (Gallego, 2015).⁵⁰

Alignment and election competitiveness. For this mechanism, the first prediction is that, if transfers are conditioned on electoral success, the government party only grants transfers to reward supporters in areas where an aligned candidate has been elected, not in others. Alignment should therefore result in organizations receiving extra funding. This is consistent with the results in Table 2: organizations receive additional transfers due to municipal alignment. It is also consistent with Figure 4, which finds no transfer cuts nor increases in swing unaligned municipalities when compared to safer ones. I do not find support for the idea that transfers also reward supporters where the aligned candidate lost.

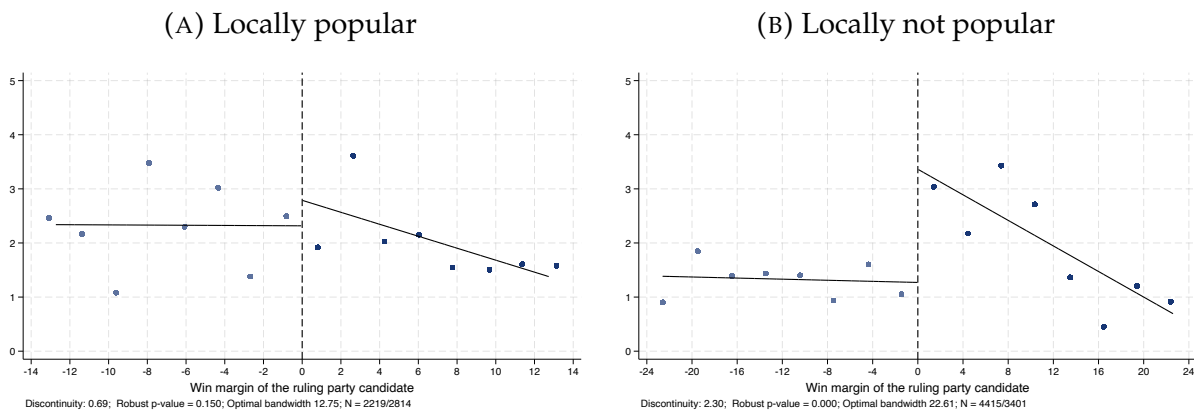
One may conjecture about why financial rewards appear conditioned on the aligned candidate's victory. First, this may be because local aligned politicians help focus the attention of government officials on the organizations that deserve a reward – which they may only be willing to do if they won. Second, organizations' support level may only be imperfectly observable and government party politicians may want organizations to have a direct stake in who wins. By conditioning payments on electoral success, they ensure that it becomes in the organization's own interest to deliver votes.⁵¹

Organizations' leaning. The second prediction is that, if government party politicians only reward organizations that have been supportive, alignment-driven transfers should be concentrated among ideologically congruent organizations. Their ideological predisposition makes them easier to mobilize with promises of transfers. Again, this is consistent with the evidence presented in Table 2, which shows that each party, when in power, favors ideologically close organizations. It is also consistent with earlier findings showing that each party, when in power, targets organizations that are not funded by the other party (Figure 6) and that have different purposes (Figure 5). The fact that government politicians primarily favor congruent organizations is compatible with the idea that transfers reward support.

⁵⁰There is anecdotal evidence of organization leaders playing up the perceptions of aligned interests. For instance, in the city of Rennes (circa 215,000 inhabitants), the head of a local theater that had received 2.9 million euros in transfers from the municipal government in 2013, sent an email to its 14,000 registered members praising the "ambitious" cultural policy of the socialist incumbent, and stressing that her opponents, if elected, would likely be less generous. The email was sent ten days before the 2014 municipal elections. The socialist candidate won by a margin of 6,861 votes. (In Antonin Billet, "Rennes : quelles subventions pour quelles associations ?" *France 3 Bretagne*, 03/03/2013.)

⁵¹I also explore whether alignment-driven transfers are larger among organizations that, in a given year, receive transfers from one or from several ministries. Estimates in Appendix Table F.14 show that alignment mostly increases transfers among congruent organizations that receive transfers from a single ministry. Potentially, local politicians leverage specific personal contacts in the relevant ministry to prioritize

FIGURE 7: Effect of alignment on transfers to congruent organizations, by government party popularity



Notes: Municipalities are split based on the government party vote share in the last presidential elections measured at the municipality level. Second-round 1995, 2007 and 2012 presidential elections outcomes are used to measure the government party local popularity for the 2001, 2008 and 2014 municipal terms. The government party is considered locally popular if it had an above-median vote share, not popular otherwise. The plots focus on observations within the optimal bandwidth. Estimates for moderate and congruent organizations are presented in Appendix Table F.12. Other notes as in Figure 3.

Win probability. Another prediction pertains to the uncertainty regarding the aligned candidates' victory. If organizations are only rewarded when the aligned candidate wins, then gaining an organization's support may require larger amounts where the aligned candidate is likely to lose. I explore whether alignment-driven transfers are larger where the government party was less popular locally. I split my sample between municipalities where the government party presidential candidate had above- vs. below-median vote shares in the last presidential elections.⁵² Importantly, in both sub-samples, discontinuities are estimated using equally close elections. Figure 7 plots transfers to congruent organizations against the alignment margin for the two sub-samples.⁵³ Appendix Table F.12 reports discontinuity estimates. Organizations only receive transfers because of alignment where the government party is less popular. I further find in Appendix Table F.13 that congruent organizations receive larger alignment-driven transfers in municipalities where the government party was not locally in power in the last term, meaning that aligned candidates were not benefiting from the incumbency advantage.

Organizations' influence. Finally, the model predicts that, all else equal, the government party is willing to promise more to organizations that reach responsive voters. France is a multiparty system where elections are decided by two-round majority voting that is susceptible to vote splitting (Pons and Tricaud, 2018). The presence of an

a funding application.

⁵²I use 1995, 2007 and 2012 second-round presidential elections vote shares at the municipality level to split municipalities into two groups for the mayoral terms starting in 2001, 2008 and 2014 respectively.

⁵³The effect appears to be driven by municipalities where the aligned candidate won by a small margin.

ideological substitute (a centrist alternative to a right-wing candidate, for example) may mean that voters who are close to indifferent between the two become responsive to the organizations' stance. Alignment-driven transfers should therefore be larger in the presence of an ideologically close alternative. I test this by splitting my sample according to the pool of candidates running in the last elections. For clarity, I focus solely on municipalities where the best-ranked opposition candidate belonged to the main opposition party.⁵⁴ Table 4 reports the results. Alignment-driven transfers are concentrated in municipalities where at least two candidates ran on a platform close to that of the government party (Panel B). In contrast, the number of ideologically distant candidates has less impact on how much congruent organizations receive due to alignment (Panel C). There are no alignment-driven transfers to congruent organizations where only two candidates, a left-wing one and a right-wing one, stood for election (Panel A). The influence of congruent organizations only appears to be valued when voters can choose from several candidates close to the government party line.⁵⁵

This result suggests that congruent organizations can only activate the support of their likely supporters, rather than sway a broader electorate. This may be because only like-minded voters are receptive to their message – for example if the message concerns club goods or issues secondary to other voters. It may also be that organizations shy away from voicing their support in the media – in interviews in the local press, for example – for fear of associating the organization's image with a candidate. Talpin et al. (2020) document how elected officials sometimes pressure organizations that are publicly critical of their action through retaliatory measures such as transfer cuts, denied access to public spaces or facilities, additional administrative burdens, etc. Local news outlets often report on organizations' complaints concerning what they perceive to be a punishment from local officials they have opposed.⁵⁶ Organization members may instead prefer to express their support on an individual basis, when personally interacting with other people in their network, for example.

⁵⁴Appendix Table F.16 reports the same Table when also including elections that were not dominated by left- and right-wing lists.

⁵⁵If the goal of politicians is to win the support of organizations, they should prioritize those whose network largely lies within the municipality's borders, not those whose members are spatially scattered, as this will likely deliver more votes (Cox et al., 2023). Appendix Table F.15 looks separately at multi-municipality organizations. Non-local organizations do not benefit from alignment-driven transfers.

⁵⁶For example, the organization leader of a 20-year-old seventy-member neighborhood association explained to reporters: "Our association has been subjected to retaliatory measures by the mayor, Laurent Rivoire, notably in the form of reduced transfers, which has led us to cancel certain activities. I didn't share the same ideas as the municipal government on the *Boissière* renovation project. Laurent Rivoire has it in for the association." (in "Noisy-le-Sec : L'association accuse le maire de lui couper les vivres", *Le Parisien*, 11/04/2016). To ease the cost of retaliation, organization leaders sometimes step down. For example, the president of a yachting association explained that he had resigned because he felt that staying would penalize the organization. All the organization requests made to the mayor had been systematically refused, which he attributed to his candidacy on an opposition list in the previous municipal elections. (in "Pierre Guillet, président des plaisanciers, jette l'éponge", *Ouest-France*, 04/25/2016.)

TABLE 4: Heterogeneity by pool of candidates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Mean (left)	Discontinuity	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value	Obs.	Bandw.
<i>Panel A. Only two lists</i>						
... congruent org.	1.07	0.592	(0.544)	0.407	11958	19.5
... moderate org.	0.59	-0.315	(0.164)	0.129	11958	13.3
... non-congruent org.	0.79	0.413	(0.317)	0.144	11958	12.7
<i>Panel B. > 1 list ideologically close to government party</i>						
... congruent org.	2.08	4.698	(0.813)	0.000	9113	7.38
... moderate org.	1.09	0.200	(0.205)	0.412	9113	12.0
... non-congruent org.	1.99	-0.455	(0.289)	0.124	9113	13.2
<i>Panel C. > 1 list not ideologically close to government party</i>						
... congruent org.	2.95	1.241	(0.614)	0.053	9286	15.0
... moderate org.	1.21	0.425	(0.241)	0.108	9286	11.7
... non-congruent org.	1.91	-0.637	(0.270)	0.031	9286	12.5

Notes: Only municipalities where the best-ranked opposition list was affiliated to the main opposition party are considered. In Panel A, the estimation sample includes municipalities where only two lists competed. In Panel B, the estimation sample includes municipalities where at least two government party lists – or one government party and an ideologically close list – competed (e.g. at least one government party list and another list from either the radical left, the left or the center competed under a left-wing government). In Panel C, the sample includes municipalities where at least two lists not close to the government party competed (e.g. at least one right-wing list and another list from either the radical right, the right or an unclassified party competed under a left-wing government). Other notes as in Table 2.

Taken together, the results are consistent with a clientelistic exchange between the government party and organizations in which transfers are conditioned on electoral support and on the aligned candidate’s victory. Congruent organizations successfully secure transfers in specific circumstances: if the supported candidate is electorally vulnerable but wins, and if they are locally influential and can reach voters who may vote for another candidate. This suggests that each side’s relative bargaining position is important for understanding why civil society organizations’ demands are met.

Organization members. Finally, to better understand why politicians may benefit from funding ideologically close organizations, it is helpful to examine how organization members compare to other voters, especially regarding their political and social behaviors. I use the 2002 wave of the European Social Survey, which has a citizen involvement module.⁵⁷ I test whether organization members systematically differ from others by regress-

⁵⁷It features questions on whether, in the last 12 months, the respondent has been a member of: a ‘sports, outdoor activity club’, a ‘cultural, hobby activity organization’, a ‘business, professional, farmer organization’, a ‘consumer, automobile organization’, a ‘humanitarian organization’, an ‘environmental, peace, animal organization’ or a ‘religious, church organization.’ Among French respondents, 44.2% are members of one of the aforementioned groups. This figure is in line with [Burrigand and Gleizes \(2016\)](#), who document that, in 2002, 44% of the population over the age of 16 was part of an organization.

ing their responses on a membership indicator variable in a linear probability model.⁵⁸

Appendix Table F.17 reports the results. Organization members are more mobilized and partisan than the rest of voters: they are more likely to vote, to feel close to a party, or to have worked for a party (Panel A). They are also more interested in politics and are more likely to report reading newspapers or listening to the radio to obtain information on news and politics (Panel B). By granting transfers to organizations, and in particular to congruent ones, politicians are not targeting demobilized or non-partisan voters. This echoes the ‘loyal voter anomaly’ (Stokes et al., 2013) and does not point to models of vote or turnout buying (Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2008). Instead, partisan and politically active voters may be valuable to the extent that they act as opinion leaders and influence others around them (Schaffer and Baker, 2015). In line with this, organization members report having more frequent social interactions than others. They also report discussing politics more often (Panel C), potentially with voters who are less interested in politics, less informed, less mobilized, or less partisan than they are. They also publicly engage in persuasive political behaviors: they are nearly twice as likely to report having demonstrated, signed a petition, or worn a campaign badge (Panel D). They are also more likely to think that, to be a good citizen, it is important to vote and be active in politics (Panel E). Given that social norms influence participation decisions (Gerber et al., 2008; DellaVigna et al., 2016), they might exert a social pressure on less mobilized segments of their social network. Finally, organization members are also more likely to trust others, or to assume that others try to be fair. Given that transfers and political support are not exchanged simultaneously, a high level of trust may help sustain reciprocal exchanges (Finan and Schechter, 2012; Lawson and Greene, 2014).⁵⁹

The idea that opinion leaders influence the voting behavior of people around them finds an echo in the literature. Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) and Berelson et al. (1954) show that most voters obtain information about elections from personal contacts. Such contacts may reach the less active sections of the population, and also be more persuasive than mass media communication, in part due to the flexibility and casualness of one-to-one discussions, or the preexisting trust between individuals. Verba and Nie (1987) highlight the role of within-organization political discussions in increasing members’ participation.⁶⁰ Face-to-face interactions have been found to be effective at mobilizing (Gerber and Green, 2000; Gerber et al., 2003; Green et al., 2003) and persuading voters (Pons,

⁵⁸In a first specification, I use no control, while in the second I control for individual characteristics (age, gender, education level, region, main source of income, and employment status).

⁵⁹Individuals embedded in social networks are more likely targets of clientelist exchanges as networks can improve monitoring or increase the social pressure to reciprocate (Cruz, 2019; Ravanilla et al., 2022).

⁶⁰Katz (1957) analyzes flows of information and documents that voters rely on trusted members of their network to give them the most relevant pieces of information. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) reports that politicians mobilize people centrally positioned in networks because they are in a good position to mobilize others, thereby turning direct mobilization into indirect mobilization.

2018). Social spillovers, which have been empirically documented in several contexts (Nickerson, 2008; Madestam et al., 2013; Bursztyn et al., 2021; Caesmann et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2023),⁶¹ may magnify the impact of individual support decisions. The importance of opinion leaders is also reflected in a statement made by a defeated candidate: “By controlling the associations, you control all the relay points in the neighborhoods, as well as all the decision-makers and influencers. [...] It’s clear, that’s how [the mayor] controls the city.”⁶²

8 Conclusion

Civil society organizations represent a variety of interests, contribute to a pluralistic public debate, and provide information to voters, all of which may help them hold politicians accountable on issues that matter to them. Organizations also make demands to politicians, and these often include demands for financial support.

In this context, I ask what makes politicians responsive to civil society organizations’ demands. I assemble a unique dataset of transfers granted by ministries to *associations* in France over a period of more than 10 years. Using close elections, I compare municipalities with similar organizations and voters that only differ in the political affiliation of the mayor. Government party politicians are systematically more responsive to organizations’ demands if the local elected official is an electorally vulnerable political ally. They grant more funds exclusively to ideologically aligned organizations, at the cost of a fiscal externality spread across taxpayers.

My findings are consistent with a reciprocal exchange, whereby government party politicians promise government transfers to organizations, provided that they are supportive and that the party wins locally. Organizations appear to receive politicians’ financial support not because they deliver campaign contributions, but because they can deliver votes. They make politicians responsive and further their members’ interests by securing funding for the organization. Yet, this influence only appears fruitful in specific circumstances: when the supported candidate is electorally vulnerable but wins, and when organizations have another candidate they could plausibly turn to – meaning that this influence is highly dependent on the electoral context.

On the flip side, engaging in such exchange risks making it costly for organizations to express critical views, especially in a context where they vie for dwindling public resources, and when securing them depends on politicians’ goodwill. Indeed, in practice,

⁶¹Refer to Campbell (2013) for a comprehensive review on the role of social networks on voter mobilization. See also Zuckerman (2005) for analyses of the role of social networks on politics in various settings.

⁶²In “À Drancy, les associations, ‘c’est le bras armé pour tenir la ville’, selon un conseiller municipal d’opposition,” *Franceinfo*, 11/28/2017

some politicians believe that funds should be limited to organizations that are not critical of the government, while some organizations have faced transfer cuts after expressing critical views and others have chosen not to seek public funding to, they claim, safeguard their independence and freedom of speech (Talpin et al., 2020; Coler et al., 2021).⁶³ If access to resources is conditional on support, then organizations, not politicians, are being held accountable – what Stokes (2005) describes as perverse accountability – and their ability to contribute to the democratic debate is undermined. Similarly, while I find that organizations manage to obtain transfers, a benefit that is highly revocable, future research may investigate whether and how organizations can secure programmatic change. Politicians may indeed be less inclined to introduce rule-based policies, as access to the benefits would not be conditioned on support.

More generally, my results help inform the debate on how civil society organizations should be funded in such a way that fosters their contribution to the public debate and allows all interests to be represented. Tax incentives promoting private giving have been criticized for being regressive (Cagé, 2020; Reich, 2020), and firms can use donations to influence policy makers (Bertrand et al., 2020, 2021, 2023). Regarding public funding, to the extent that there is no objective measure of organizations' value, some discretion may inevitably be left to elected officials, and electoral competition may not be a sufficient check against clientelism.

⁶³For instance, Utopia 56, an organization created in 2015 which helps refugees and illegal foreigners, explains on its website "Utopia 56 neither requests nor receives government funding. This choice enables us to guarantee our freedom of speech and independence of action."

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