Coordination Advantage: An Explanation for Why Political Alignment Pays Off

Fernando Meireles (IESP-UERJ)
Natália S. Bueno (Emory University)

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> *Political Science in Brazil is going through a difficult period, in which the training of professionals and the production of research are running against the tide of history. There is a certain hostility toward quantitative methods and statistics. Rigorous qualitative methods have not taken their place, though.* ***What has replaced them is an absence of method and of rigor.***
>
> — Gláucio Soares, "The Methodological Achilles' Heel of Political Science in Brazil" (2005)
> *O Calcanhar Metodológico da Ciência Política no Brasil*

goal for today

- Reflections on how methods papers are received by applied researchers

- Examples from one project we're working on

intergovernmental grant system

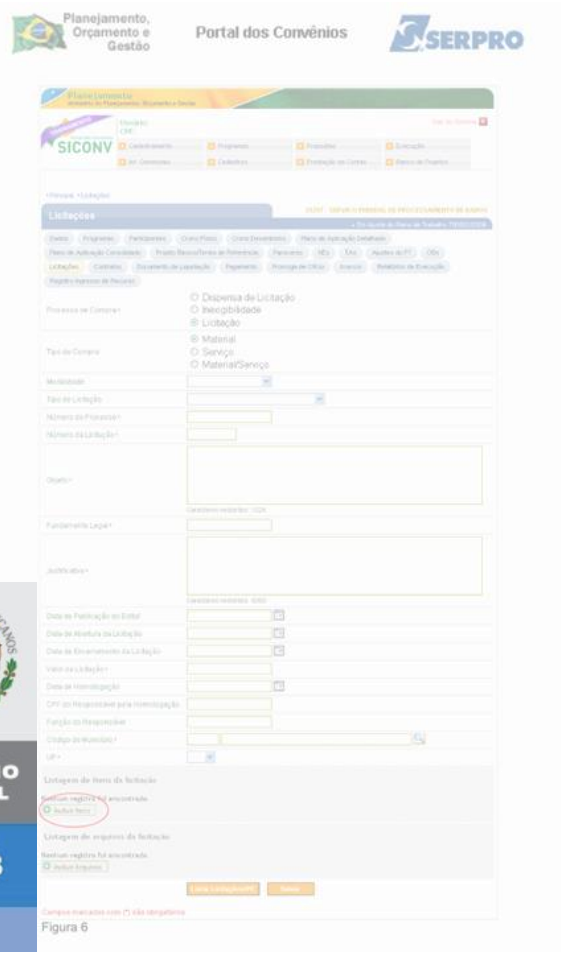






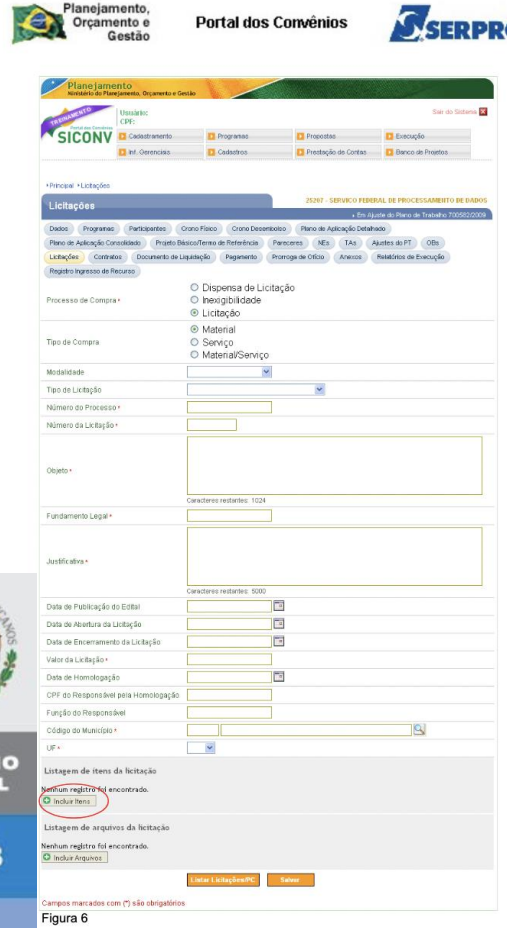

FEMA
Preparedness Grants
Manual
FEMA Grant Programs Directorate


Manual de Transferencias
Federales para Municipios
Gobierno
Federal
SEGOB

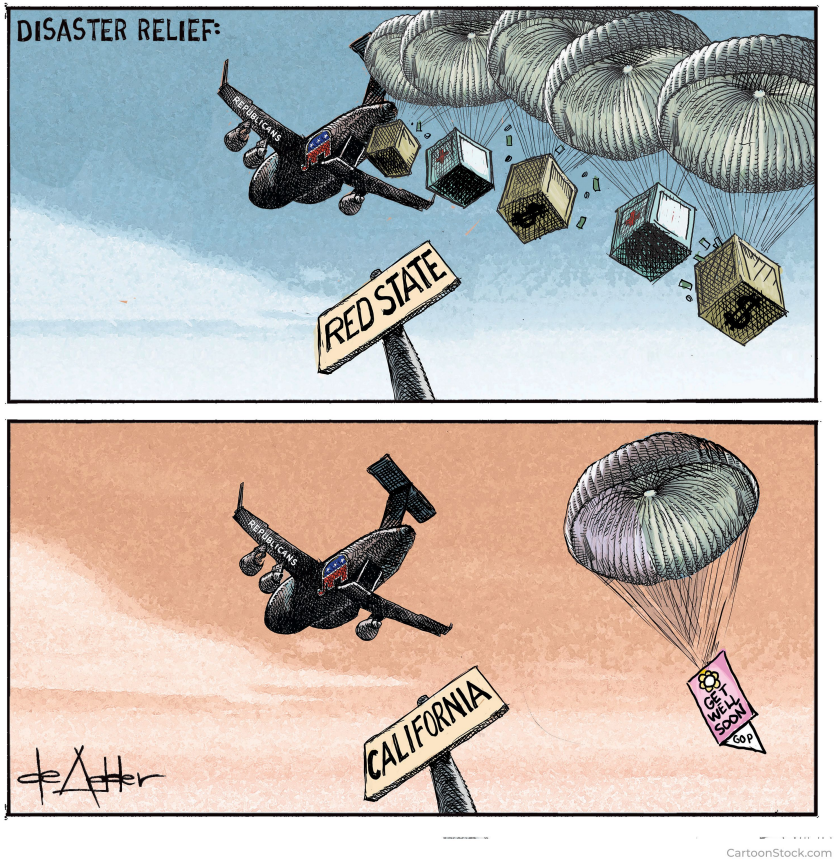

Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão
Portal dos Convênios
SERPRO
SICONV
Figura 6

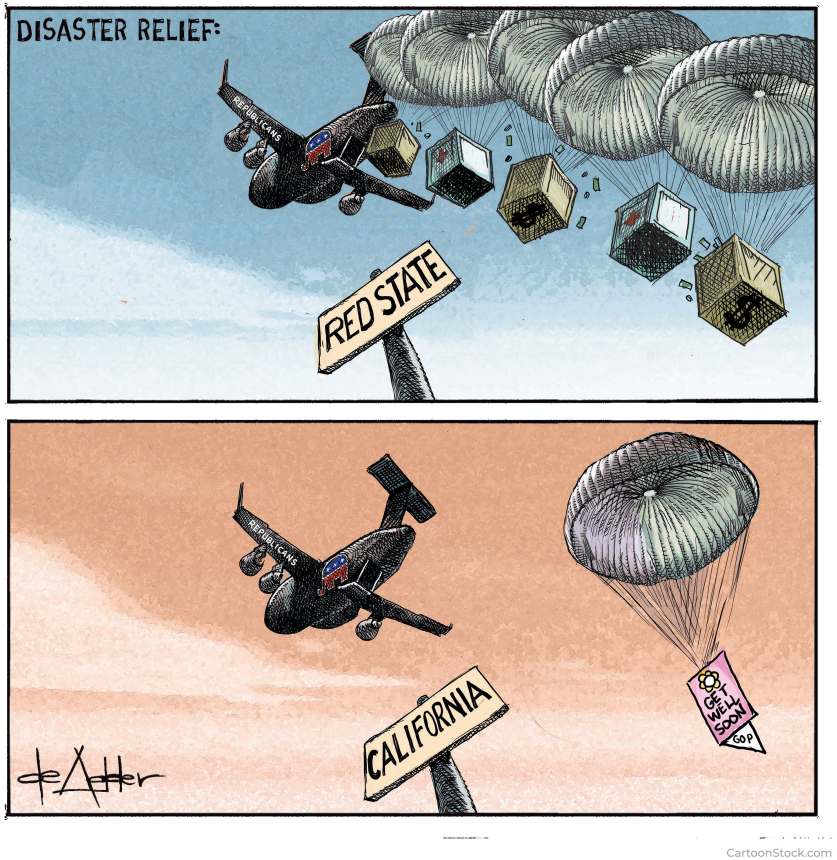

FEMA
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MANUAL DE TRANSFERENCIAS
FEDERALES PARA MUNICIPIOS
ESTADOS UNIDOS MEXICANOS
GOBIERNO FEDERAL
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Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão
Portal dos Convênios
SERPRO
SICONV
Licitações
Processo de Compra
Dispensa de Licitação
Inexigibilidade
Licitação
Tipo de Compra
Material
Serviço
Material/Serviço
Modalidade
Tipo de Licitação
Número do Processo
Número da Licitação
Objeto
Fundamento Legal
Justificativa
Data de Publicação do Edital
Data de Abertura da Licitação
Data de Encerramento da Licitação
Valor da Licitação
Data de Homologação
CPF do Responsável pela Homologação
Função do Responsável
Código do Município
UF
Listagem de itens da licitação
Nenhum registro foi encontrado.
Incluir Itens
Listagem de arquivos da licitação
Nenhum registro foi encontrado.
Incluir Arquivos
Campos marcados com (*) são obrigatórios
Figura 6

political favoritism





- Partisan favoritism

  Arulampalam et al., 2009; Bracco et al., 2015, Sollé-Ollé; Sorribas-Navarro, 2008; Ha and Jenkins, 2024; Thomas 2018; Bueno 2018; Brollo and Nannicini, 2012

- Regional, district, and birthplace favoritism

  Hodler & Raschky, 2020; Khalil et al., 2021; Mattos et al., 2021

- Religious and ethnic favoritism

  Beiser-McGrath et al., 2021; Curto-Grau et al., 2018; Parthasarathy, 2017



- Systems of grants have rules, procedures, and oversight.
- Yet favoritism persists in Germany, Sweden, Norway, Spain, England, etc.

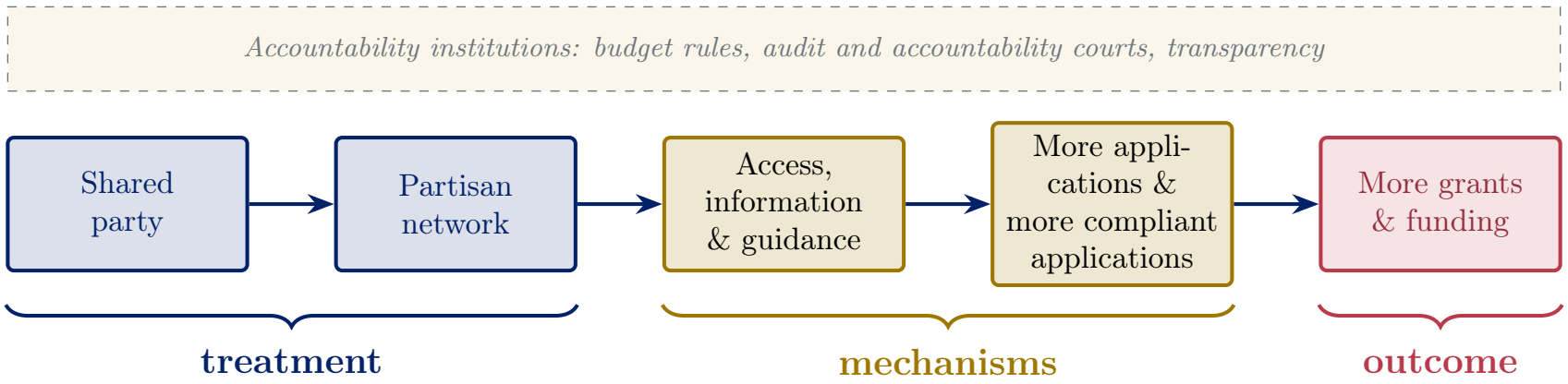
How does partisan favoritism operates when there is a system of accountability?

Argument in Brief

1. Partisan coordination is used effectively to gain advantage within formal constraints.
2. Coordination based on co-partisanship happens pre-application rather than in post-submission favoritism.
3. Co-partisans receive more public funds than their non-copartisan counterparts even in the presence of accountability systems and bureaucratic procedures that constrain discretionary allocation of resources.

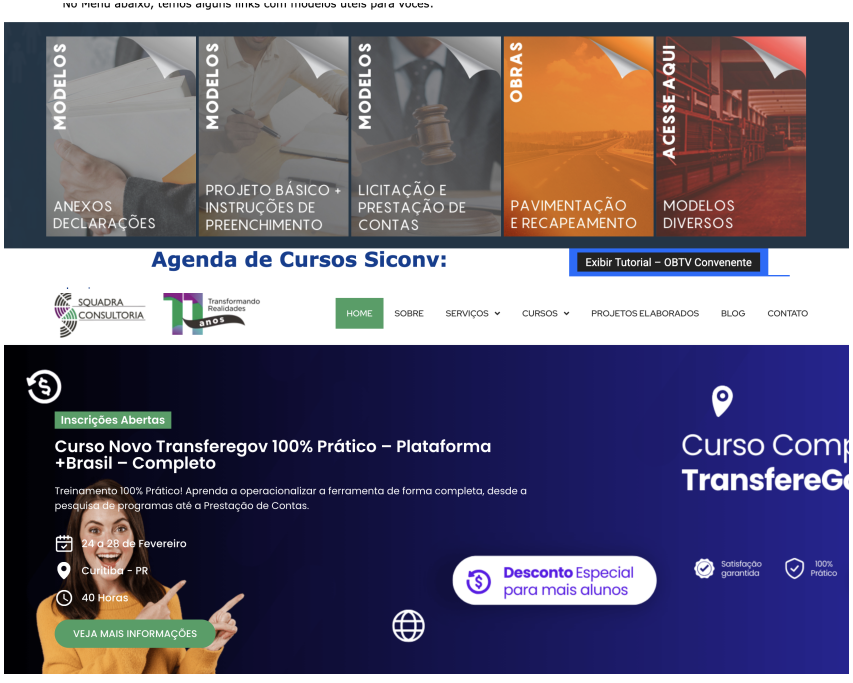
Empirical Findings

1. Co-partisans request more grants, make more compliant grant applications, and receive more resources relative to their non-co-partisan counterparts.
2. Partisan ties across tiers and branches of government facilitate connections, flow of information, and access between copartisans.


Accountability institutions: budget rules, audit and accountability courts, transparency
Shared party
Partisan network
Access, information & guidance
More applications & more compliant applications
More grants & funding
treatment
mechanisms
outcome

- Local copartisans:
  - have more access to upper-tiered officials
  - learn more about federal programs
  - obtain support from central bureaucracy to prepare applications
- Copartisans' applications have greater "merit"
- Reduces risk in discretion
- Reduces cost of identifying allies

- Mayors are in charge of lots of basic services,
  - Little control over revenue collection
  - Reliant on transfers and grants
- Multi-party system $\rightsquigarrow$ multiparty coalition in presidents' cabinet
- "Weak" parties
- Federal country

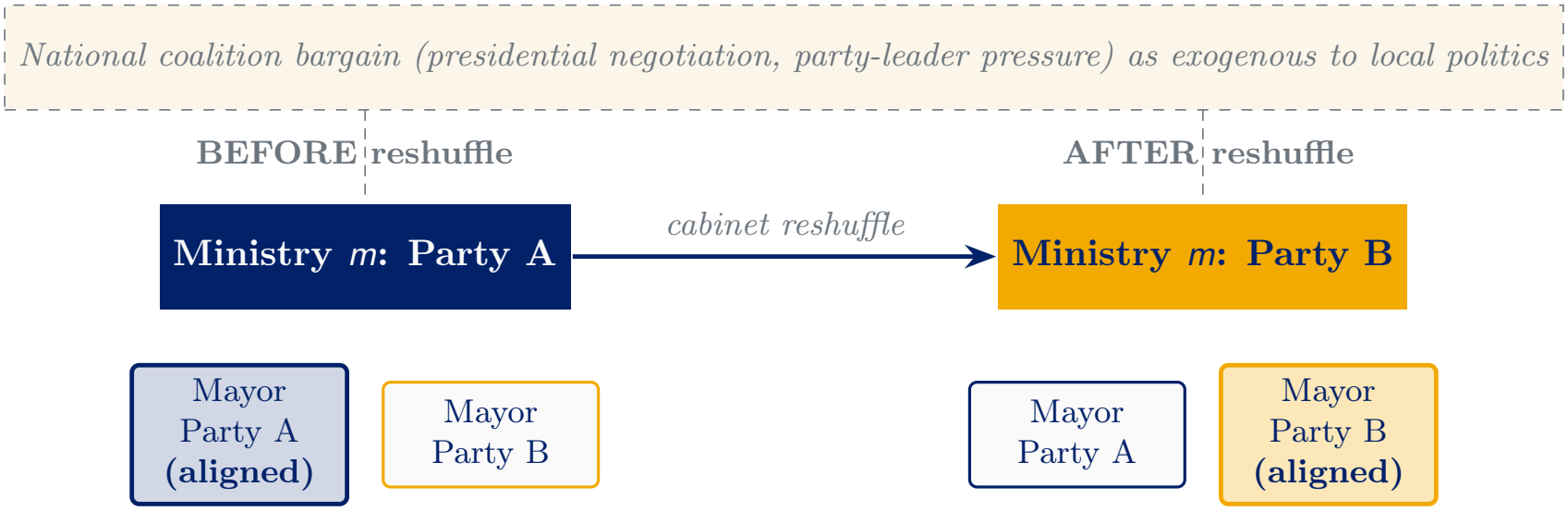


- Municipalities need to apply for federal grants
- Legislators can also send money to localities
- Ministries review, approve, and disburse money
- Procedures and rules under oversight
- Private market to support grant applications

the universe of municipal grant proposals, 2009–2016

- $\approx$ 481,000 proposals; $\approx$ 80,000 implemented grants ($\approx$ 83% not awarded)
- 17 ministries (97% of discretionary transfers); 5,559 municipalities
- Three **original** datasets: submission documentation (compliance measures), legislators' travel (visits) and Ministry of Cities schedules (meetings)

- Outcomes: submission of proposals and value received per capita
- "Treatment:" mayor and cabinet minister belong to same party in a given year
- Assumption: cabinet nominations are exogenous to local politics



Mayors did not change parties, the ministry did.
Alignment flips from above: municipalities cannot shape cabinet selection.

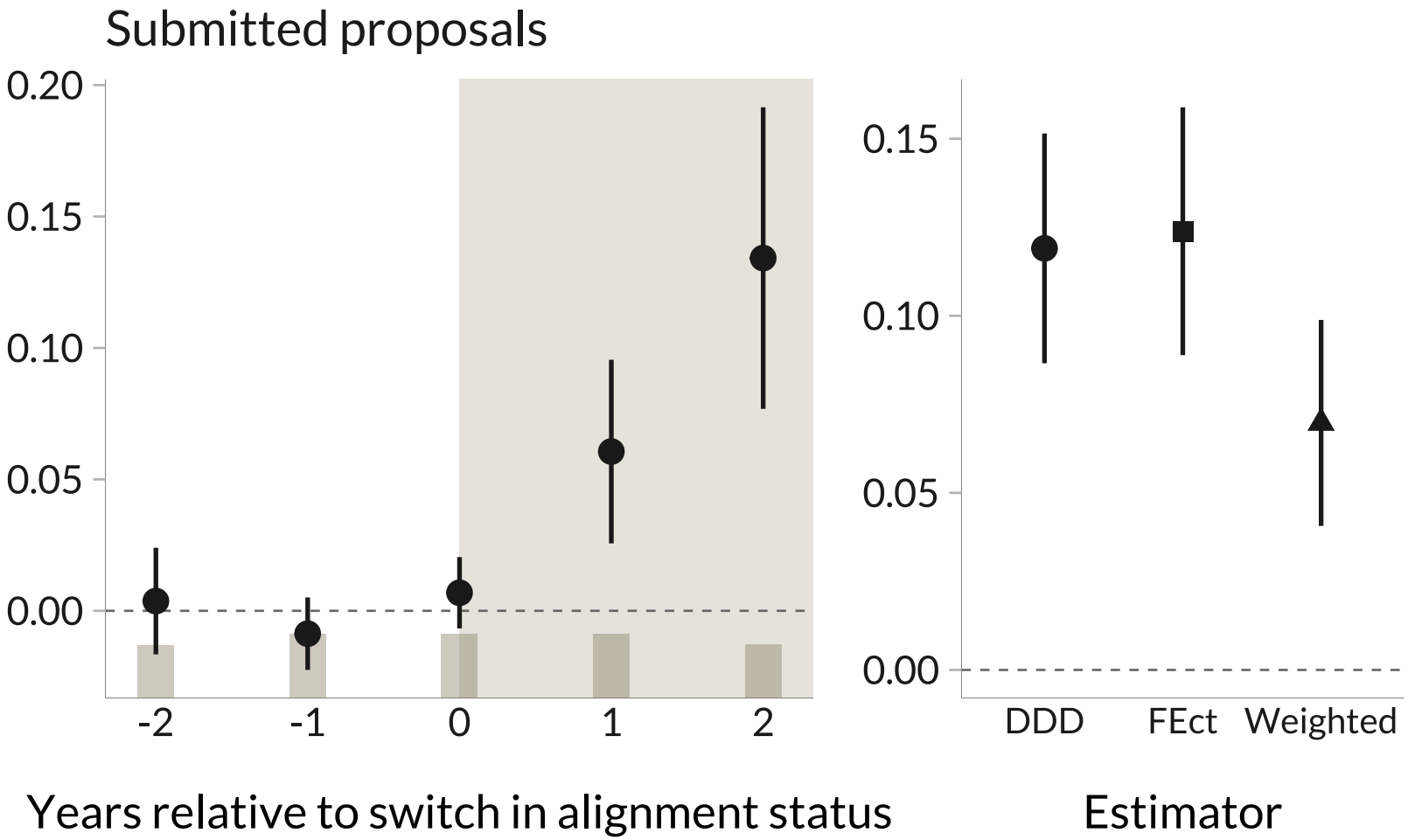
1. DDD: Triple-differences
2. Unit: municipality i and ministry m in year t

$$Y_{imt} = \beta Alignment_{imt} + \gamma_{im,term} + \delta_{mt} + \zeta_{it} + \epsilon_{imt} \quad (1)$$

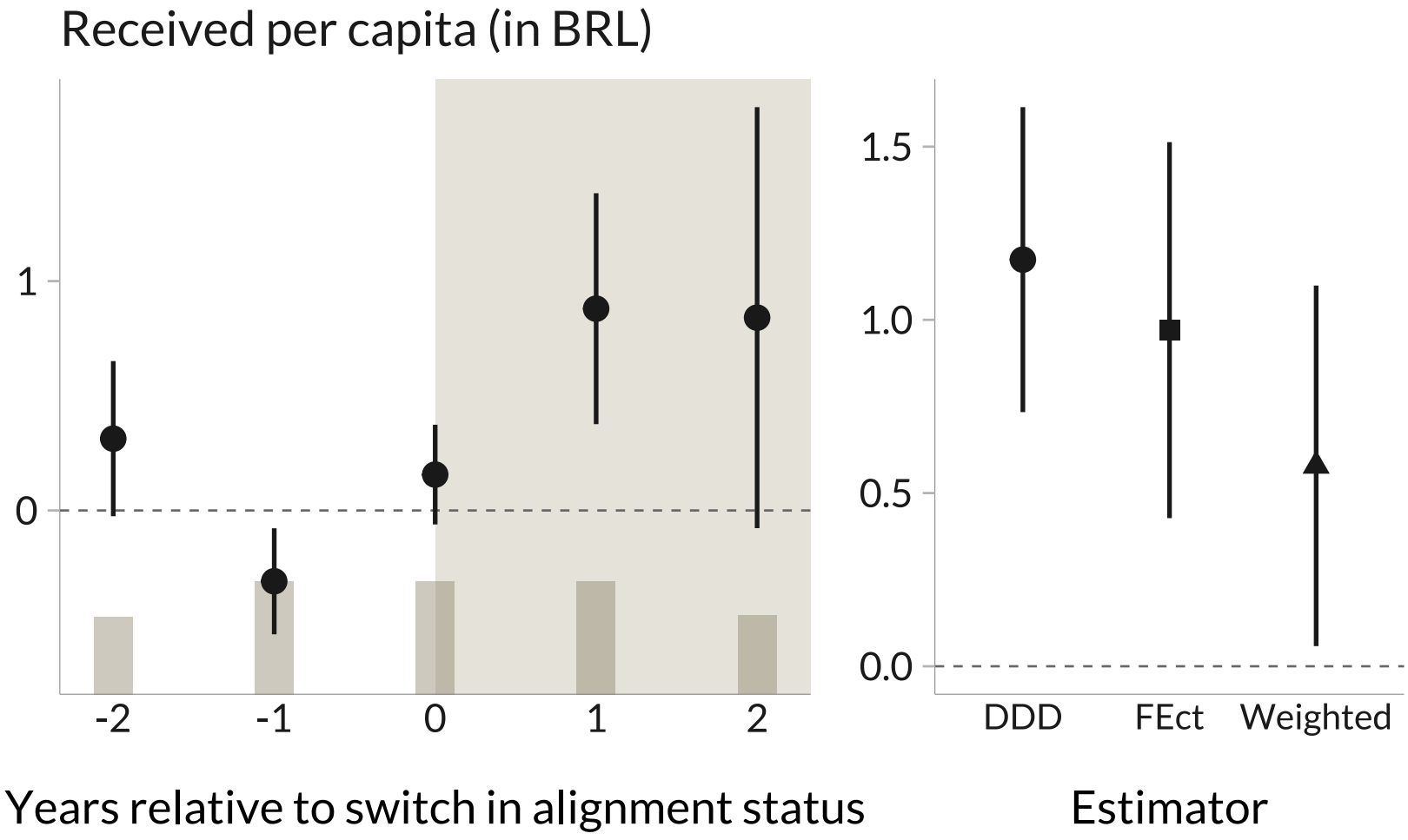
3. Here $im, term$ are municipality-ministry-mayoral term fixed effects, mt are ministry-year fixed effects, and it are municipality-year fixed effects.
4. Additional estimators: FEct (Liu & Xu 2024) and weighted (Sun & Abraham 2021)
5. For DDD and event-study the standard errors are clustered at the municipality and bootstrapped for FEct
6. No evidence of differential pre-trends based on placebo tests

	Ministry 1	Ministry 2
Muni A	**Muni A** gains alignment here	Muni A stays unaligned
Muni B	Muni B (control): never aligned	Muni B (control): never aligned

$$\left[\Delta_{A,M1} - \Delta_{A,M2}\right] - \left[\Delta_{B,M1} - \Delta_{B,M2}\right]$$



+0.12 proposals per ministry-year (≈10% the residualized SD).



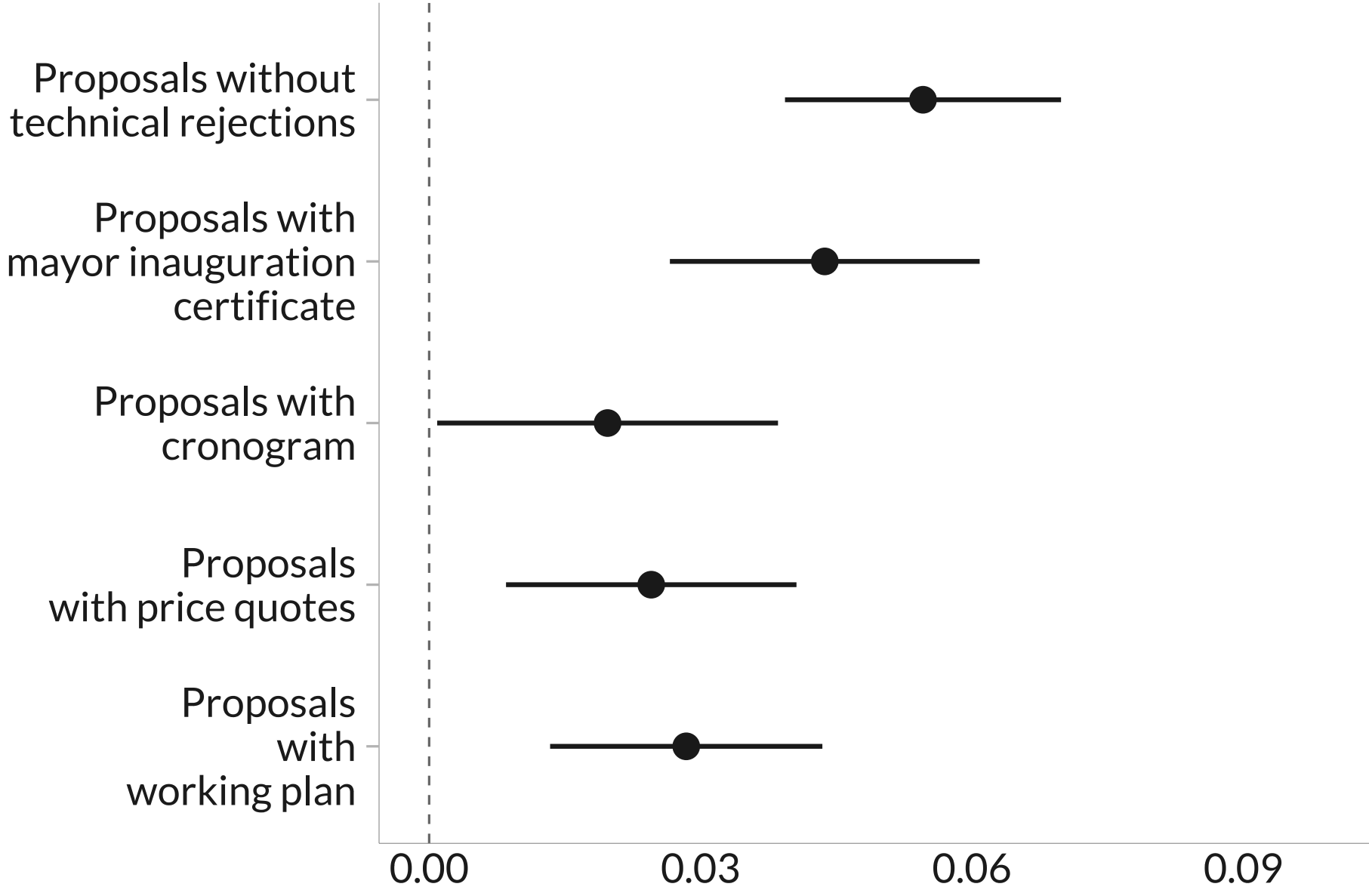
+1.39 R$/capita per ministry-year (8% of the residualized SD).

Does partisan alignment operate via coordination advantage?

1. Proposal compliance
   - 1.1 a written justification for requesting funds from a specific social program
   - 1.2 price quotes from private providers
   - 1.3 the mayor's inauguration certificate
   - 1.4 investment schedules
   - 1.5 no errors that led to technical rejection of the proposal
2. Attrition
   - 2.1 We only observe compliance for municipalities that applied
   - 2.2 Alignment ("treatment") affects which municipalities apply
   - 2.3 Missing data on compliance is not as good as random relative to the treatment (more missingness in the control group)
   - 2.4 First cut is to redefine the outcome: all places that did not submit have low compliance applications

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     We will come back to this issue, bear with me!

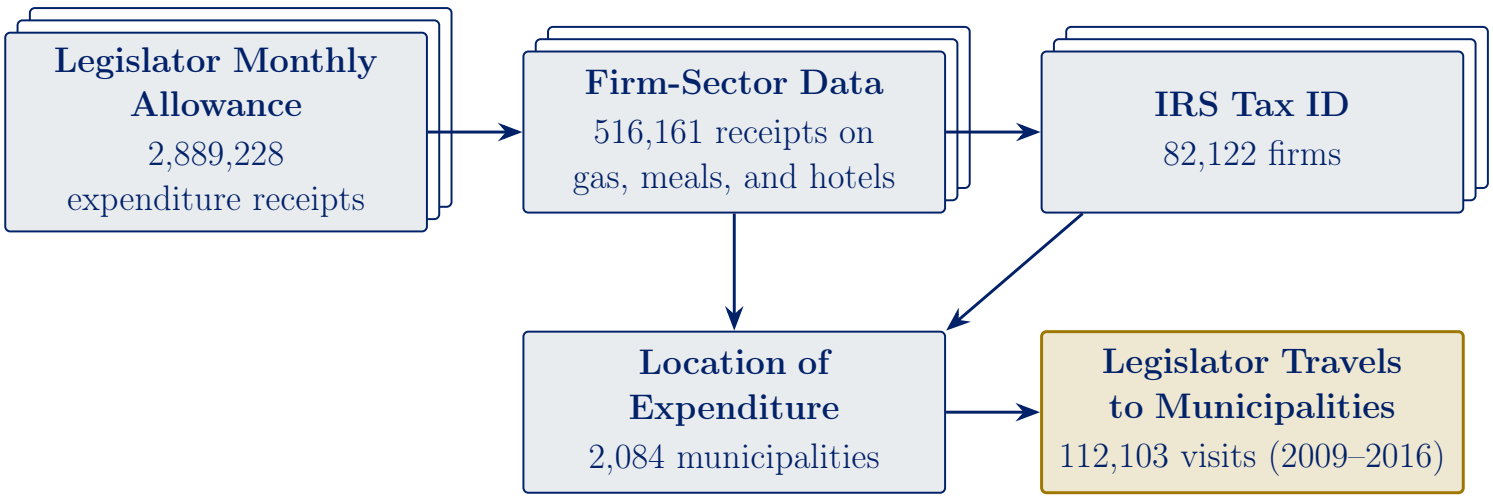

Proposals without technical rejections
Proposals with mayor inauguration certificate
Proposals with cronogram
Proposals with price quotes
Proposals with working plan
0.00
0.03
0.06
0.09

- Deputies support mayors in having access to federal resources, mayors help deputies get elected

- Party enters federal coalition $\rightarrow$ copartisan legislators visit municipalities $\rightarrow$ mayors submit more (and more compliant) proposals

Novel data on partisan connections using about 3 million receipts from legislators' travel and meeting minutes

mapping connections between mayors and legislators



partisan alignment predicts connections between officials

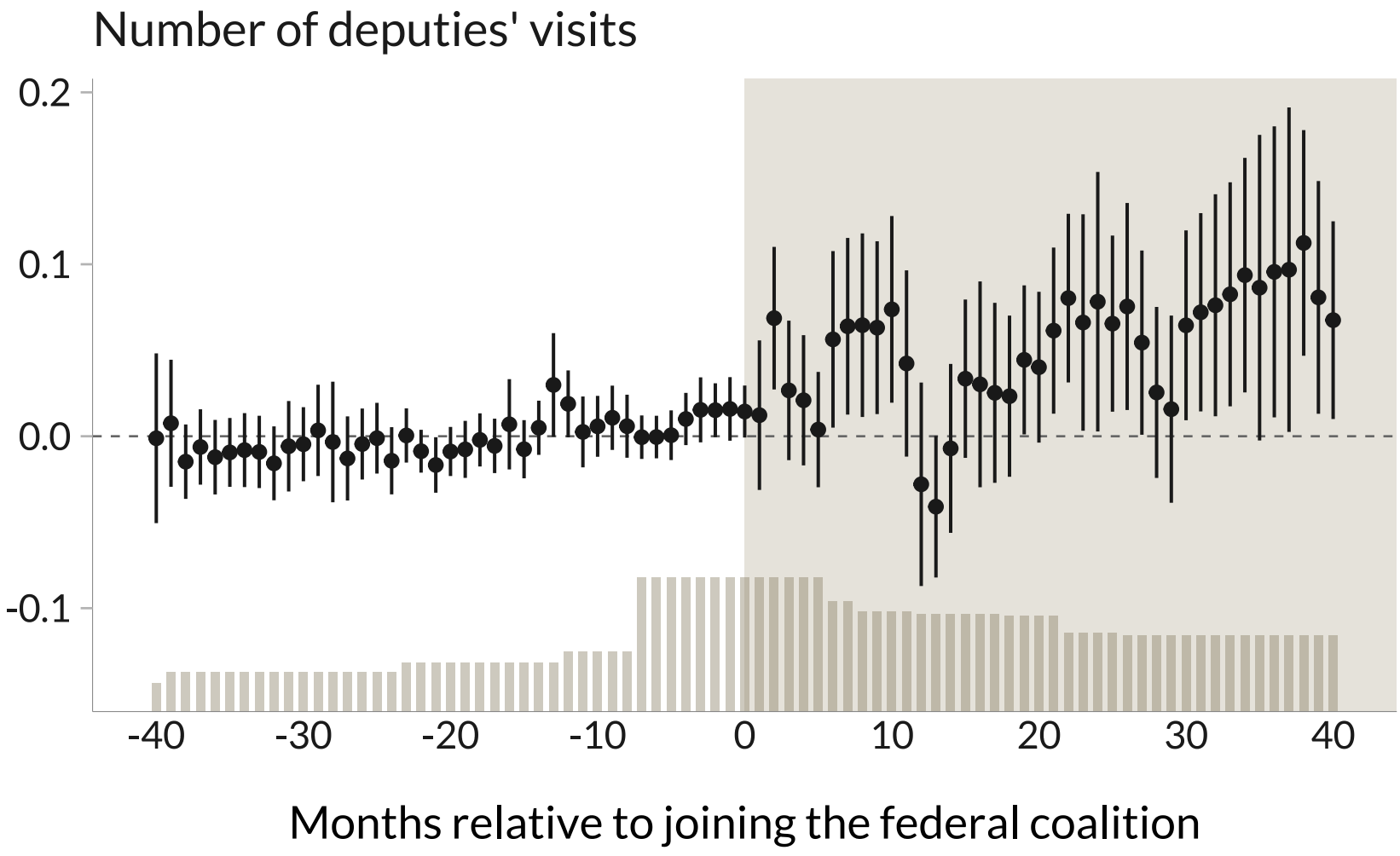
- Outcome 1: Number of aligned deputies' visits
- Explanatory variable 1: Mayors' party enter the federal coalition (officeholder in a ministry)

- Outcome 2: Proposals submitted by mayor
- Explanatory variable 2: Visit by aligned federal legislator (relative to no visit or visits exclusively by non-copartisan legislator)

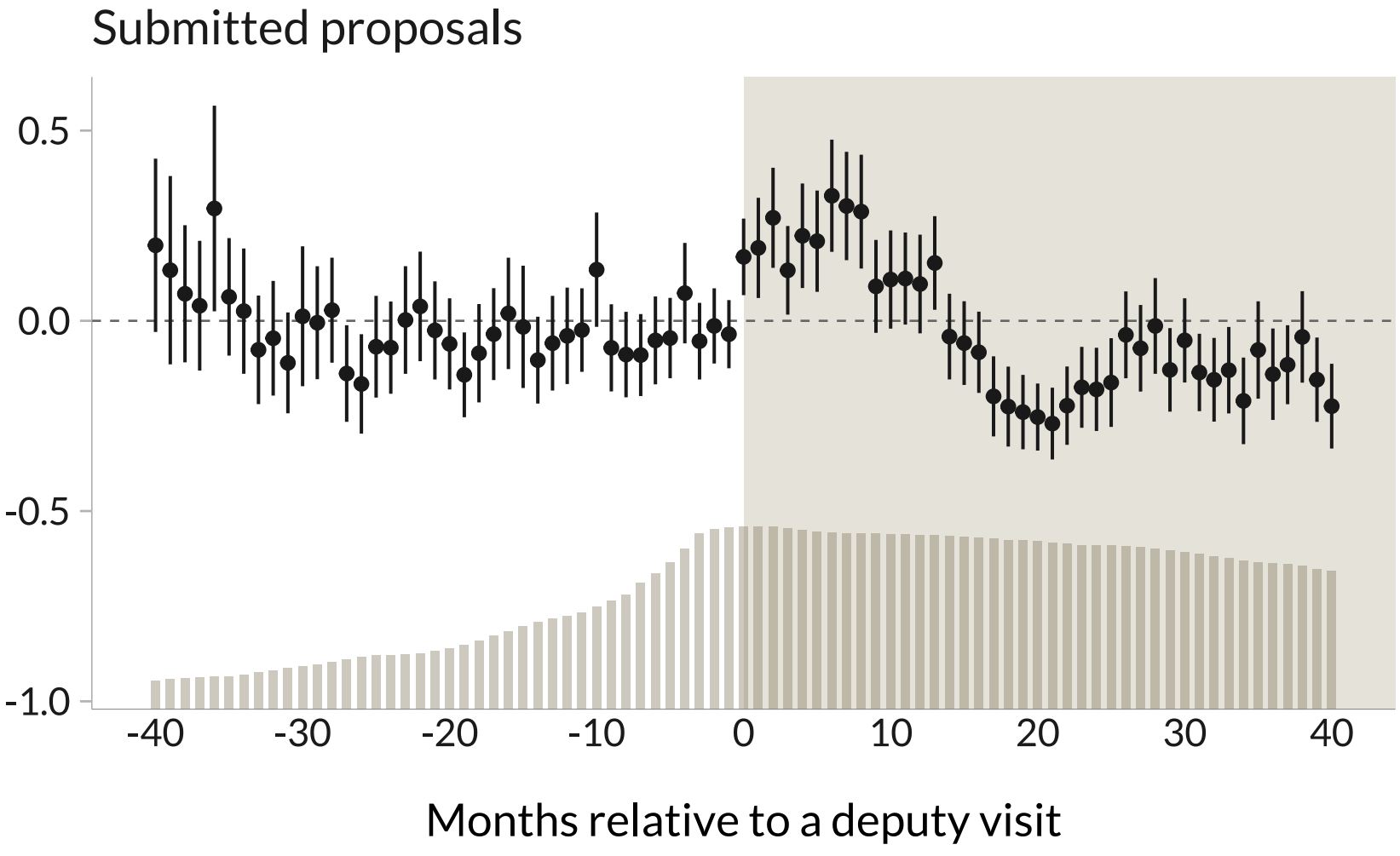
$$Y_{it} = \beta D_{it} + \gamma_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

- Here, γ is municipality-mayoral term fixed effects, and δ is month fixed effects

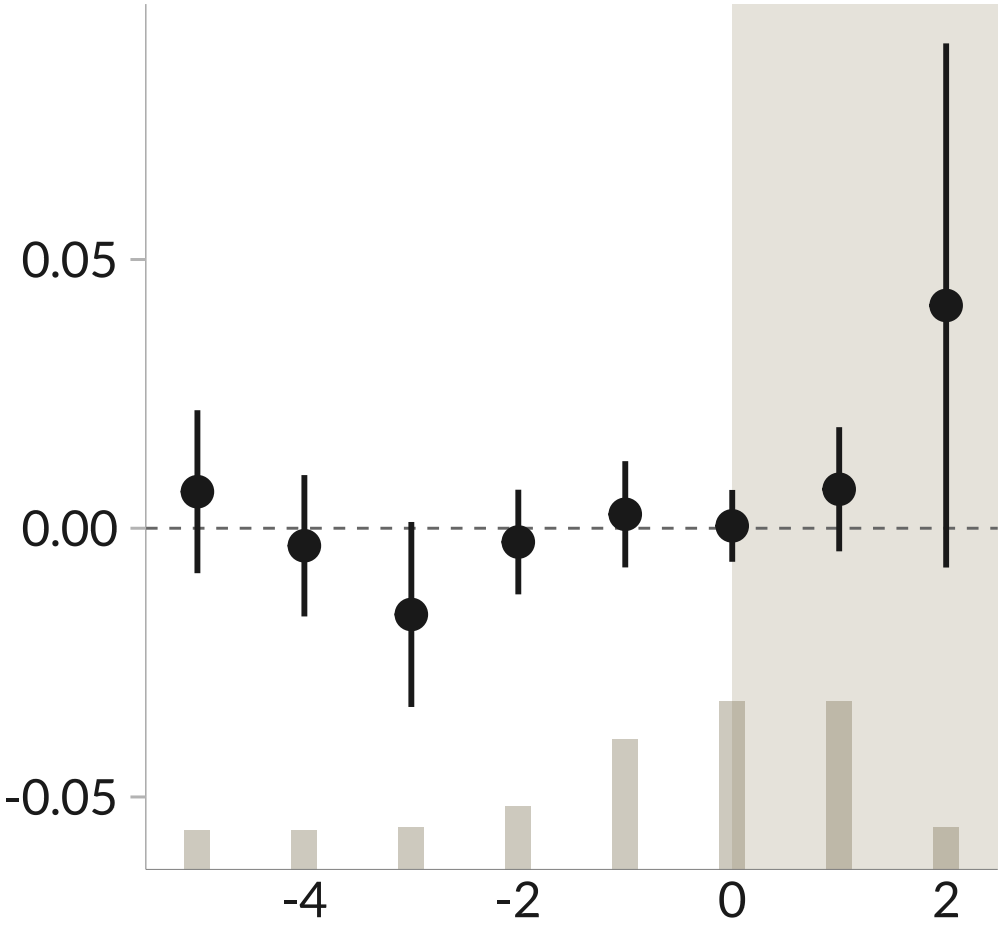
Legislators visit copartisan mayors more after a copartisan becomes a minister



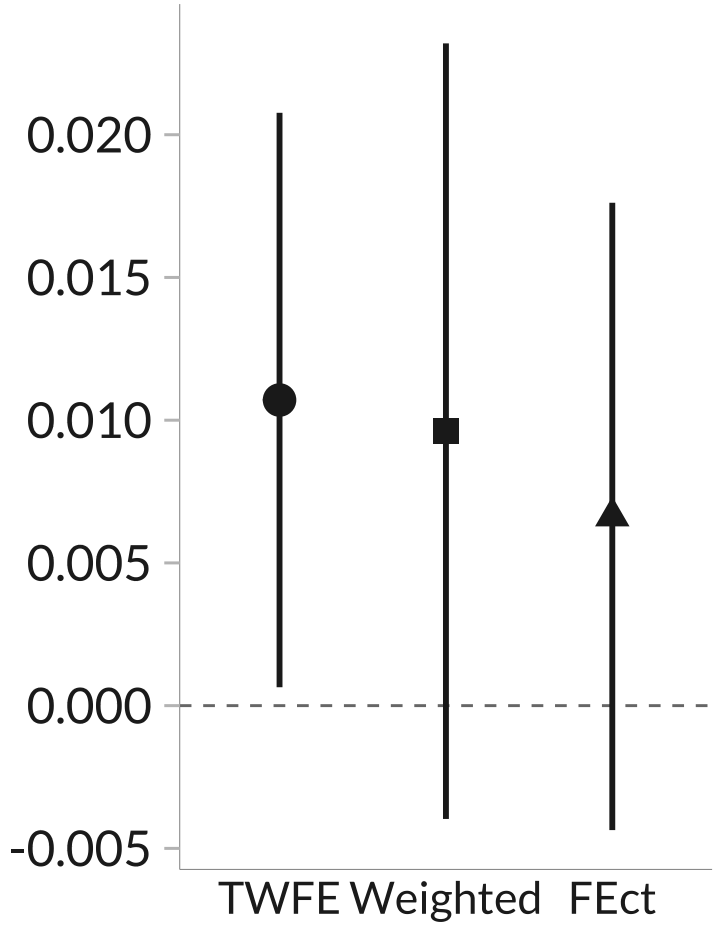
Mayors submit more grant applications after a copartisan deputy visits their locality



ministers also receive more visits from their copartisans



Years relative to ministerial alignment



Estimator

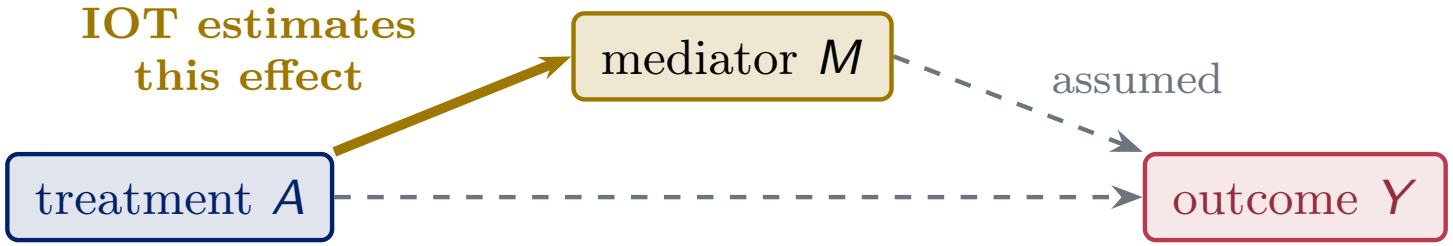
Suppose a reviewer asks . . .

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Blackwell, Ma & Opacic (2024),
"Assumption smuggling in intermediate outcome tests of causal mechanisms"

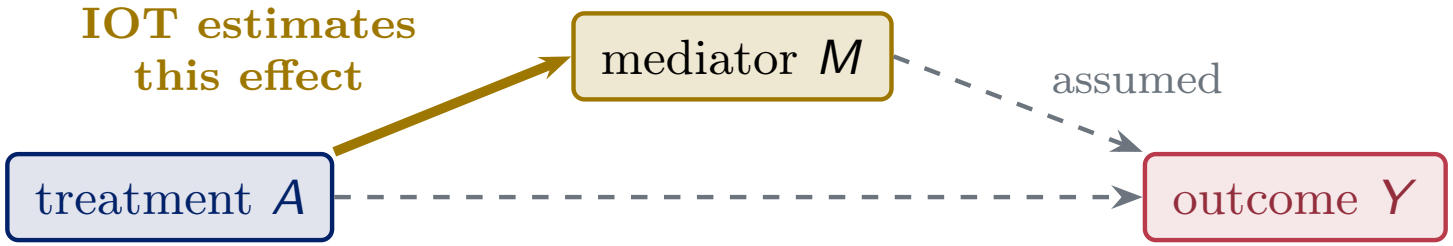
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- **Intermediate outcome test (IOT):** estimate the treatment's effect on a mediator. If the mediator moves, interpret it as part of the mechanism.
- **Common practice:** about 40% of APSR, AJPS and JOP papers testing mechanisms (2022–23) use IOTs; 10% use formal mediation.
- **The paper's point:** what an IOT says about the mechanism depends on assumptions authors rarely state ("assumption smuggling").

With randomization alone, an IOT can neither establish nor rule out a mechanism. Stronger assumptions let us rule mechanisms out, yet rarely let us determine the existence of a mechanism.

to rule out a mediator

Assume monotonic mediator response: treatment moves the mediator in one direction only for all units

IOT $= 0 \Rightarrow$ **no indirect effect**

Untestable and not true by design.

to identify a mediator

Assume monotonic mediator response and that the mediator raises the outcome on average

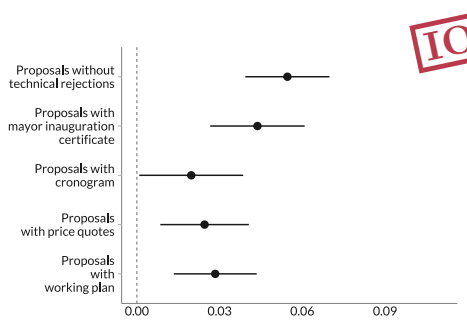
IOT $\neq 0 \Rightarrow$ **still not sufficient**

Sufficient only under full monotonicity: every individual-level effect, including the mediator's effect on the outcome, runs in a single direction.

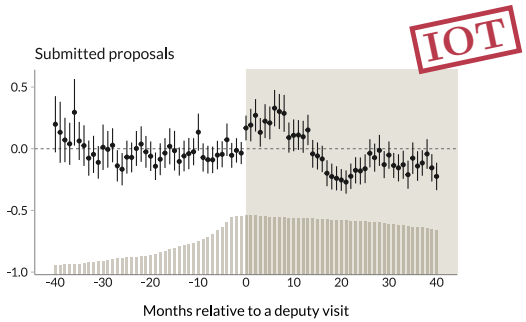
grief (n.): the sudden realization that a new methods paper says your evidence does not show what you thought it did.

denial	anger	bargaining	depression	acceptance
"not our problem"	*"that is for experiments!"*	*"let's call it suggestive"*	*"maybe we have nothing"*	*"what can we learn?"*

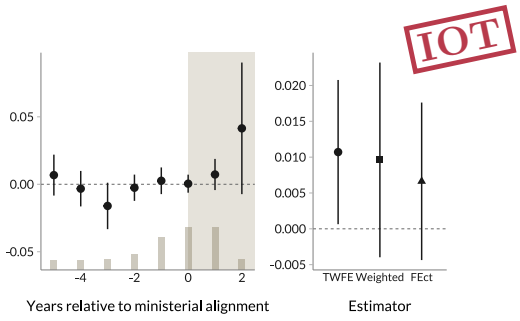
denial | anger | bargaining | depression | acceptance



compliance



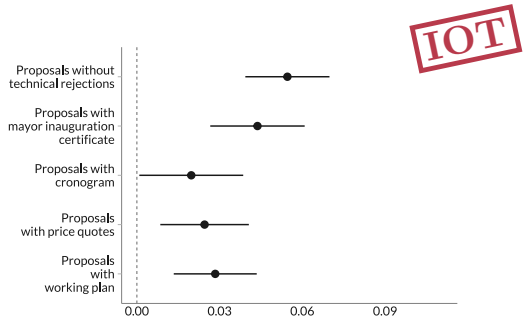
proposals after a deputy visit



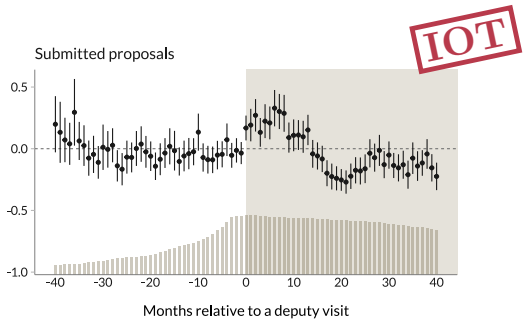
ministry meetings

Alignment moved something in the middle, so we read it as the mechanism.

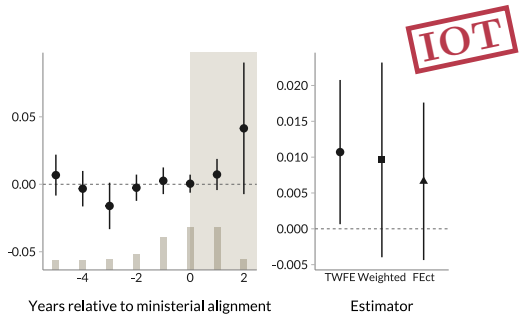
denial | anger | bargaining | depression | acceptance



compliance



proposals after a deputy visit



ministry meetings

Alignment moved something in the middle, so we read it as the mechanism. **Sure looks like intermediate outcome tests**. Also, our title: *Coordination Advantage: An **Explanation** for Why Political Alignment Pays Off*

grief (n.): the sudden realization that a new methods paper says your evidence does not show what you thought it did.

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"not our problem"	***"that is for experiments!"***	*"let's call it suggestive"*	*"maybe we have nothing"*	*"what can we learn?"*

denial | **anger** | bargaining | depression | acceptance

"That's for experiments!"

Yet still a problem for observational studies. Not fair.

mediator effect in one direction

monotonic mediator response

randomization: true by design

an experiment

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homogeneous effects across cohorts

no carryover after alignment ends

exogenous timing of alignment

no anticipation

parallel trends

us: three- and two-way fixed effects

for visits, meetings, and compliance

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bargaining: keep the claim, downgrade the evidence

denial | anger | **bargaining** | depression | acceptance

> *"Visits and meetings are **descriptive**, not causal estimates."*
>
> a slide cut from an earlier version of this talk

> *"We examine whether visits from copartisans **are correlated with** proposal submissions, **probing** whether copartisan legislators transmit informational or informal resources to mayors."*
>
> Ctrl+F and Ctrl+C: "correlate" replace "cause"; "probe" replace "test"

grief (n.): the sudden realization that a new methods paper says your evidence does not show what you thought it did.

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"not our problem"	*"that is for experiments!"*	*"let's call it suggestive"*	***"maybe we have nothing"***	*"what can we learn?"*

denial | anger | bargaining | **depression** | acceptance

mediator	**intermediate outcome test**	**interpret as**
visits	alignment → visits → proposals	in favor of existence
meetings	alignment → ministry meetings	in favor of existence
compliance	alignment → compliant proposals	in favor of existence

We do not interpret IOTs like Blackwell et al. say we should.

denial | anger | bargaining | **depression** | acceptance

Monotonicity

No mayor applies less because a copartisan becomes minister.

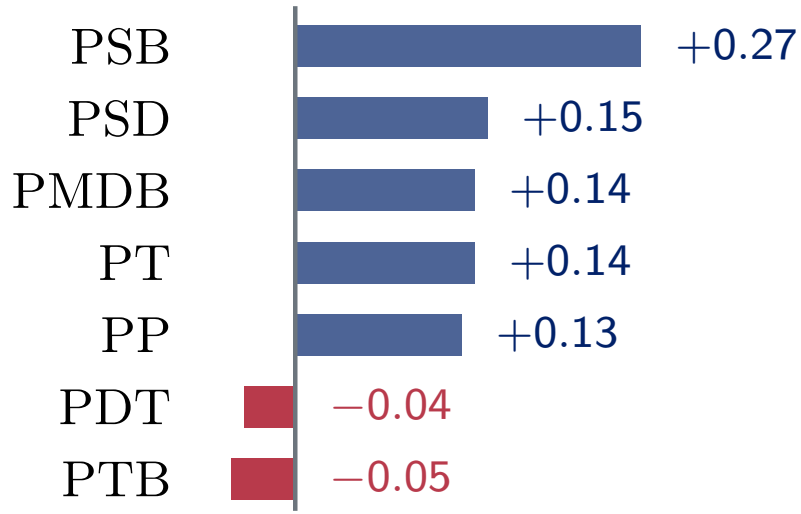
Why it matters

Mayors who apply more and mayors who apply less can cancel out, so a null IOT is uninformative.

How to check

Every subgroup effect on the mediator should be ≥ 0 (e.g., causal forests).

In our data

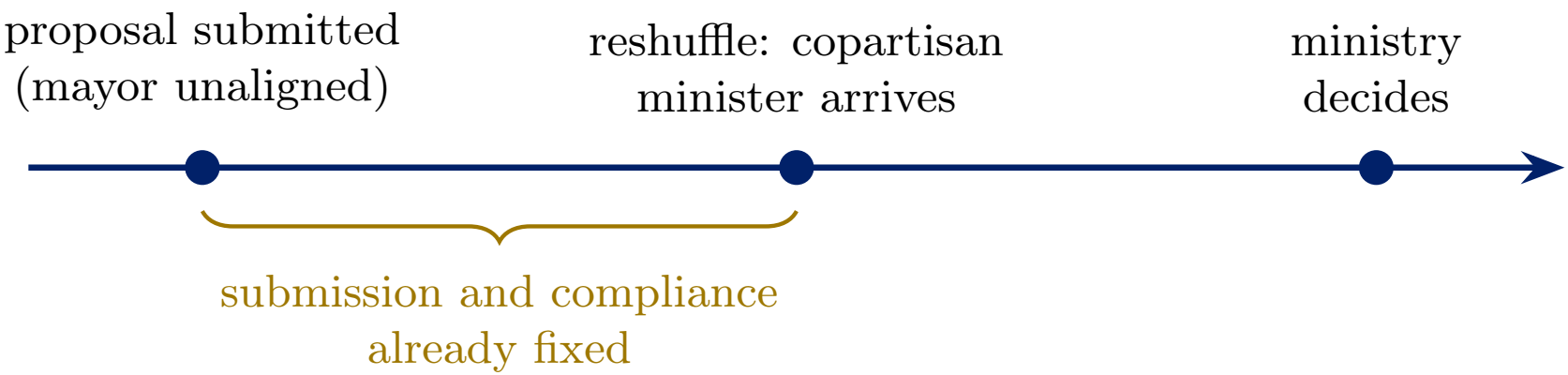


These tests on mediators require more assumptions.

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denial | anger | bargaining | depression | **acceptance**

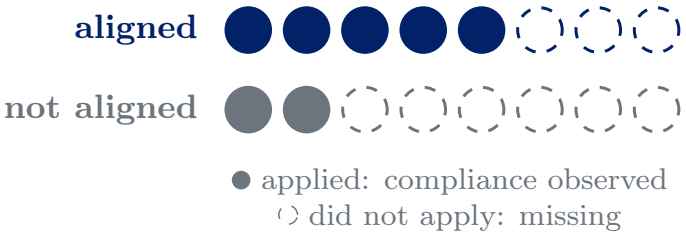


Test the argument's implications by design (akin to a controlled direct effect), not through intermediate outcomes.

stage	**what it led us to do**
denial	say what we actually claim
anger	separate identifying the effect from explaining it
bargaining	find the weak links
depression	treat monotonicity as a substantive question
acceptance	build new tests based on implications

Mechanisms are not even our most salient methodological problem.

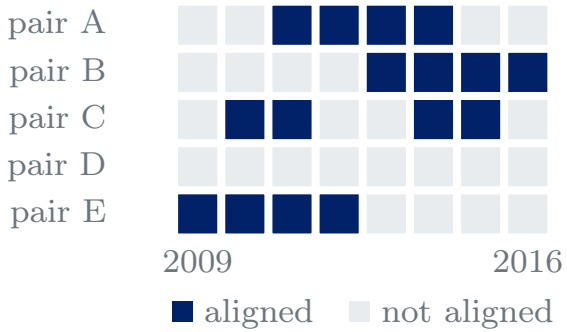
1. Differential attrition



Alignment changes who applies, so compliance is missing more often among the non-aligned.

Lee bounds: too wide to be informative.

2. On-and-off treatment

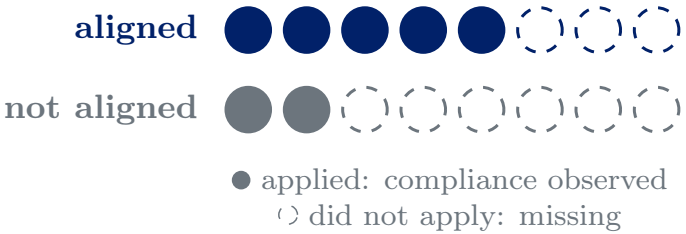


Alignment turns on at different times and off again at reshuffles.

One pooled DDD coefficient mixes all these comparisons.

Mechanisms are not even our most salient methodological problem.

1. Differential attrition

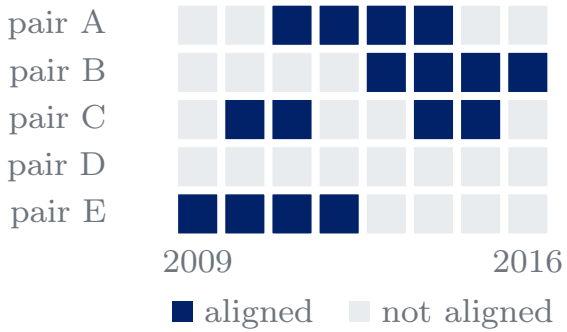


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Path forward: sharp bounds (Duarte et al. 2023)

2. On-and-off treatment

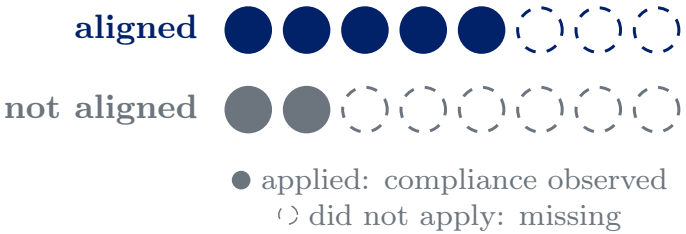


Alignment turns on at different times and off again at reshuffles.

One pooled DDD coefficient mixes all these comparisons.

Mechanisms are not even our most salient methodological problem.

1. Differential attrition

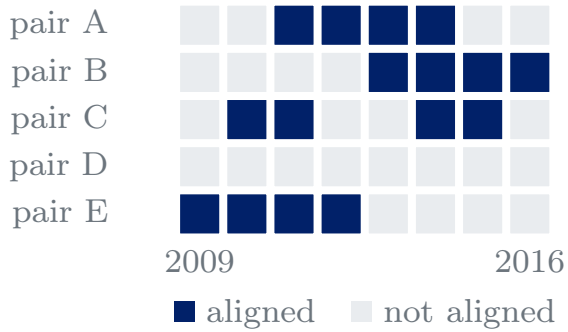


Alignment changes who applies, so compliance is missing more often among the non-aligned.

Lee bounds: too wide to be informative.

Path forward: sharp bounds (Duarte et al. 2023)

2. On-and-off treatment



Alignment turns on at different times and off again at reshuffles.

One pooled DDD coefficient mixes all these comparisons.

Path forward: new triple-differences estimators

(Strezhnev 2023; Ortiz-Villavicencio et al. 2025; Caron 2026)

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- Formal and informal networks are powerful conduits of information and access, and, ultimately, influence in policy
- More rules and procedures may backfire

Thanks! Comments to natalia.bueno@emory.edu

Presentation prepared using support from AI for graphical content and organization of ideas