Pork-barrel politics at Queen’s Park

by

Tejas Aivalli,
2008-2009 Intern,
Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP)
1303A Whitney Block,
Queen's Park,
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1A1

Phone: 416-325-0040

Email: tejas.aivalli@utoronto.ca

www.olipinterns.ca

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Former U.S. president Andrew Jackson declared in 1828, “To the victor go the spoils”, while referring to the practice of rewarding those who had supported him. This practice is now referred to as “pork-barrel politics” and is usually not a criminal activity. The difference between pork-barrel and providing legitimate and effective valid economic programs can be a fine line, can become blurred, or can involve an inaccurate judgment on the part of the sponsor, and it is difficult to prove.

The term “pork-barrel politics” started being mentioned in the media with the announcement of the resumption of a train service between Peterborough, ON and Union Station in Toronto, ON during the 2008 federal election. The train route would run through the ridings of Conservative Party MPs who had been elected for a very short time. During the election, the issue was repeatedly brought up with allegations of buying votes with the train service. The two MPs in question – Dean Del Maestro and Jim Flaherty – were re-elected.

The above instance shows the occurrence of a phenomenon typically associated with that in the United States – “pork” or “pork-barrel politics” – occurring within Canada. This paper attempts to investigate how the nature of “pork” and “pork-barrel politics” differs, if at all, in Ontario from that in the United States.

Overview

This paper looks at what is popularly termed “pork” (or “pork barrel”) and the politics surrounding it, in the Ontario legislature. While the term is often used in a derisive manner, usually to criticize the government, this paper will show that it is an integral part of politics and it is not particular to any one party. This paper will also attempt to show that pork is more common-place than is made out in the media.

The paper will first define the term pork barrel. Existing literature on this issue will be examined to give examples to the reader as well as to examine why it is done and its relations to incumbency. The paper will then look at an amalgam of interviews of MPPs at Queen’s Park to examine the prevalence of pork barrel politics and the reasoning behind it. The aforementioned will then be analyzed and the conclusion will be drawn.

Definition

John McMenemy defines pork barrel as “a term to describe political patronage – the “pork” – dispensed by the government party from the public treasury – the “barrel” – to a community or private interests as a reward for, or incentive to provide support to the party in the form of money, organizational resources, or votes.”

He cites various examples of pork, such as

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“government jobs or untendered contracts for individuals and firms, and public works such as bridges, post offices, road, airport and waterfront improvements for communities. …, grants for job retraining and industrial incentive programs, regional development, as well as some federal expenditures related to military defence.”

For the purposes of this paper, I have used a wide definition of pork - patronage that is dispensed by the government party to its own members, to ridings it hopes to turn over as well as that which is extracted by its own and opposition members.

**Literature Review**

Most of the literature about pork barrelining looks at federal examples but the analysis is useful nonetheless. For literature review, three papers have been used. I have summarized them below.

**LIP**

Donald Blake, in his paper ‘LIP and Partisanship: An Analysis of the Local Initiatives Program’ looks at the federal Local Initiatives Program between 1972 and 1975. Blake analyzes spending under the program over four years to see if partisanship affected spending decisions. The study “elicited evidence that ridings held by Liberal cabinet ministers, especially those lacking comfortable majorities, tended to receive greater LIP benefits than would be expected if only the socio-economic needs of ridings were considered.” Since spending was not allocated on a riding basis for the first year, Blake concludes that there was likely no coordinated effort at partisanship but that spending was influenced by ministers and government MPs. He notes that “Support for the Liberal party in the 1972 election seems to have been rewarded, and some attention seems to have been paid to the electoral perils facing certain Cabinet ministers and Quebec Liberal MPs.”

Blake states that one must not “conclude that the apparent partisan biases [of spending allocation] were necessarily the result of a comprehensive and conscious policy.” Considering Blake was part of the Liberal Club while at the University of Alberta, I offer that perhaps his conclusion may be somewhat affected by his prior political participation while at university.

From Blake’s paper, we can conclude that pork barrelining is used to reward past support as well as to hold ridings won by a slim margin. Also, since ministers have greater access to the policy-making and spending process, most ministerial ridings received more than their fair share of program spending. Government members who win by slim pluralities also tend to get more spending allocated in order to keep them with the party.

**DREE**

In ‘Economic Policy and Electoral Self Interest: The Allocations of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion’, Bruce Macnaughton and Conrad Winn analyze spending allocations of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE) and conclude that the

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6 Ibid
7 Macnaughton 319
8 Blake 26.
9 Blake 28.
10 [http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/arts/donald_blake.cfm](http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/arts/donald_blake.cfm)
allocations were guided by vote optimization theory\textsuperscript{11}. As per optimization theory, “governing parties purposefully seek an optimum rather than maximum level of voter support”\textsuperscript{12} in order to “augment their electoral support until they have just enough votes to win”\textsuperscript{13}. They found that “with hardly an exception, Social Credit ridings received larger DREE allocations than expected on the basis of economic need”\textsuperscript{14}. They conclude that “according to optimization theory, the governing Liberals were rational to target Social Credit ridings if they had reason to suspect the Social Credit organizations to be vulnerable. In the 1980 federal election, the Social Credit Party failed to elect a single Member of Parliament”\textsuperscript{15}. The government’s desire to assure electoral approval in volatile constituencies “was a factor, but only a modest supplementary factor, in its allocative behaviour”\textsuperscript{16}.

The above also leads one to the additional conclusion, that, “ridings which are either safe or hopeless from the perspective of the governing party are unlikely to receive much government largesse”\textsuperscript{17}. Thus, pork-barreling is used to ‘buy votes’ in volatile ridings by specific funding allocation.

\textit{Interest groups and incumbency}

Thompson and Stanbury, in their look at incumbency and interest group politics, try to “offer a tentative general explanation of the widespread existence and persistence of public policies that are inefficient and non-majoritarian”\textsuperscript{18}. They hypothesize that “the federal Cabinet chooses to behave like (the U.S.) Congress – devoting its efforts to re-electing incumbent Liberal MPs, rather than maximizing the number of seats for the party as a whole”\textsuperscript{19}. They list two possible reasons for such actions. “It is possible that a majority party coalition made up of individuals intent upon maximizing the personal benefits of continuing to hold office would choose to exclude some members or potential members from the coalition if, thereby, the coalition could get a solid majority that would be easier to maintain over time. Alternatively, they might choose incumbency maximization simply to increase the average benefit or ‘political rent’ accruing to the remaining members of the coalition”\textsuperscript{20}. As a result, Thompson and Stanbury conclude, the interests of Liberal incumbents will “continue to be favored at the expense of the interests of the party as a whole and, more seriously, the broader public interest in efficient, majoritarian policies”\textsuperscript{21}. Therefore, they propose, “groups, firms and trade associations that wish to influence government policies and practices... should express their demands through special interest groups in the ridings of Liberal incumbents”\textsuperscript{22}.

\textsuperscript{11} Macnaughton and Winn. 321, 222.
\textsuperscript{12} Macnaughton and Winn. 319.
\textsuperscript{13} Macnaughton and Winn. 320.
\textsuperscript{14} Macnaughton and Winn 323.
\textsuperscript{15} Macnaughton and Winn 323.
\textsuperscript{16} Macnaughton and Winn. 322.
\textsuperscript{17} Macnaughton and Winn. 320
\textsuperscript{18} Thompson and Stanbury 239.
\textsuperscript{19} Thompson and Stanbury 240.
\textsuperscript{20} Thompson and Stanbury 240.
\textsuperscript{21} Thompson and Stanbury 240-1
\textsuperscript{22} Thompson and Stanbury 241.
In summary, interest groups would be the most successful if they lobby government incumbents since they are the most likely to be able to respond to their demands, irrespective of whether they are in the public interest or not.

**Instances of pork**

In the following paragraphs, I will look at some instances of pork which will relate to the points raised in the Literature Review above.

Since pork-barreling is most commonly associated with the United States, it is appropriate that the first instance be American. In the US$700 billion financial rescue bill passed by the U.S. Congress in fall 2008, there were tax exemptions (US$2 million) for children’s wooden arrows that would benefit “an Oregon company, and was proposed by Oregon senators”23. Given the lack of party discipline, passing a bill is made possible by pork-barreling, a practice everyone engages in24. In Canada, with or despite party discipline, parties win government by assembling “winning coalitions by plundering the fisc to give each of many different interest groups something they want”25. Thus, pork-barreling in Canada is slightly different, but not non-existent.

An article in “the Vancouver Province, observed that federal highway money seems to dry up west of Winnipeg. In 1998-99, where Ontario received $170.4-million in federal highway grants, British Columbia, with 22 per cent of the nation’s highways (and very few Liberal MPs) received only $190,000. Since 1988, B.C. has obtained $30-million for roads in grants. By contrast, Quebec and Newfoundland will have received over $400-million by the year 2003”26. In February 1999, when conflict-of-interest allegations were made against Prime Minister Jean Chrétien regarding loans given to a businessman from his riding, the Prime Minister responded that he was involved in the issue as a MP27.

William Watson noted in the National Post “Pierre Trudeau’s transport minister, the late Don Jamieson, once justified federal financing for a Newfoundland bridge to which there was, as yet, no access, by arguing, in effect, that if you build a bridge, someone’s bound to build a road to it. ... Mr. Jamieson was a very successful politician for two decades”28. Wajid Khan, a MP who switched to the government party before the 2008 election claimed credit for delivering long-delayed funding - $83 million - to the municipality which contained his riding, as well as $95 million to the regional government29. Khan lost the election. More recently, of the 33 grants for seniors groups handed out by the federal government in March 2009, all but one went to government ridings30. The opposition alleged that the government directed 94 percent of funding under a $45 million program for the disabled to ridings it held31.

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23 Terence Corcoran. “Bailout bill more about shafts than building confidence”.
24 Terence Corcoran. “Bailout bill more about shafts than building confidence”.
25 William Watson. “Friends, Canadians, countrymen, lend me your earmarks”.
27 “Ghosts and Skeletons”. Government Mismanagement: Minister Besieged.
28 William Watson. “Friends, Canadians, countrymen, lend me your earmarks”.
29 Linda Diebel. “Switch to Tories paid off, Khan says”.
30 John Ivison. “Liberals wake up, smell pork”. nationalpost.com
The above instances exemplify rewarding of past electoral support, vote optimization, as well as interest group influence.

Queen’s Park

Instances of pork-barreling at the provincial level make it to the media less often. When Minister Dwight Duncan and Minister Sandra Pupatello, both from Windsor, ON, secured a $400 million investment in Casino Windsor instead of putting the money into health care, they were taken to task for pork-barreling by the official opposition. However, a regional paper portrayed that as acceptable.

While pork-barreling is looked down upon, some politicians are quite proud of it. Minister Rick Bartolucci claimed on his website to have brought $3.5 billion to the Sudbury riding since forming government in 2003. In his piece, Stan Sudol notes millions of provincial dollars invested in the riding through the local hospital, health care programs, post-secondary training, $18 million for mining-related initiatives and other investments. He states that it is “always beneficial to have a member – especially a cabinet minister – sitting with the government in power.” Sudol concludes the piece by saying Bartolucci has been very successful in pork-barreling for Sudbury and it is a good thing. In the face of such expectations, a case can be made that elected members are merely responding to their constituent demands when they engage in “pork-barreling”. Also, in the case of Minister Bartolucci, since the investments in his riding are related to demands in the riding, the case for labeling spending in the riding as “pork-barreling” in the same sense as in the U.S. becomes weak. As I will demonstrate through analysis of interviews of Ontario MPPs, pork-barreling at Queen’s Park is very limited and is hard to label as such.

MPP Interviews

The MPPs interviewed for this paper were a mix of long serving MPPs to newly elected MPPs. I also interviewed government and opposition MPPs whose ridings bordered each other. All in all, six former ministers, currently in government and opposition were interviewed. Of the 17 MPPs interviewed, nine were opposition members (three NDP, six PC) and eight were government (Liberal) members. No sitting ministers were interviewed because they tend to be very obtuse in their answers. Former ministers were specifically interviewed because of their greater access to policy-making while minister. MPPs who formerly or currently had OLIP interns were interviewed because I presumed they would be more comfortable discussing the topic with an intern. Just over a third of the MPPs interviewed were told the title of the paper, while the others were told the topic was about getting funding for the riding. MPPs who were told the title were mostly those who had had OLIP interns. The answers of MPPs have been amalgamated into answers to questions they were asked.

- What types of interest groups are active in the riding?

Hospitals were cited by 11 of the MPPs interviewed making it the most widely reported lobby group. Municipalities were the second most widely reported lobby group, with nine MPPs referring to a municipality as a lobby group in the riding.

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33 Stan Sudol. “Politicians go into spending frenzy to get re-elected”. northernlife.ca. 6 September 2007.
34 Stan Sudol. “Politicians go into spending frenzy to get re-elected”. northernlife.ca. 6 September 2007.
• What tactics does he/she use to raise their issue with the government and get their issues resolved?

Most members (government and opposition) said they wrote letters of support for projects in their ridings. A few members said they followed up the issue with the bureaucracy, and/or with the minister responsible. Long serving members (government and opposition) reported successfully working with the government of the day to resolve issues. Question Period was generally the last resort of all members to raise and/or resolve funding issues.

One opposition member who is quite vocal during Question Period stated he was quite happy about making noise to get funding for his riding. Opposition members who had been ministers stated they were generally treated well by current ministers to help resolve issues. Two such members and another long serving member stated using Question Period to get the issue on Hansard when every approach had failed. One opposition member reported using a rally at Queen’s Park to successfully to resolve an issue.

Former ministers reported negotiating with other ministers to get their projects funded. One former minister agreed it was advantageous to have access to the Premier, to get funding for the riding. As ministers, members usually raised an issue one on one with the minister responsible. Failing that, one member reported approaching the Premier’s Chief of Staff and the Premier as a last resort. A long-serving member stated that if a project was moved to the top of the priority list, something would definitely fall off the bottom, but he wasn’t aware of it.

One government member reported leaning on ministry staff, cabinet ministers and staff in the Premier’s office to lobby for his riding. The member stated he indulges in give-and-take in terms of lobbying with the minister responsible and in return, is treated well by ministers generally. One long serving member reported being approached by a minister when he was in opposition to lead a project. Another member stated the following guidelines to successfully obtain funding:
  o Don’t burn bridges – you will be on both sides of the house eventually, so don’t piss on others
  o Don’t take it personally – if you don’t get funding, it’s because there’s not enough money or it’s not a priority
  o Be tenacious, not rude
  o Scoring money means capacity to understand system
  o Patience – if it’s an emergency, it means you didn’t plan well
  o Don’t make stuff up
  o Plot where landmines are; map your approach as per where you want to end up; don’t land on landmines
  o Acknowledge when it’s not going to happen
  o Share the glory
  o Pick your fights – keep in mind how much funding you need and the political expediency of your request
• Does the riding get special attention from the government to turn it over or to hold it?

Most opposition members, especially long serving ones, stated the government had given up trying to swing the riding. One opposition member reported the candidate from the government party implied riding would get funding if a government member was elected during her election. Most opposition members noted that if the government actually gave special attention to their riding by increasing funding, they would get elected by a larger margin. One government member agreed with the statement of a former minister about the need to pay special attention to his riding (“You can’t screw around with ______. You HAVE to get it right.”) since it is a closely-held riding.

• Is the riding ‘punished’ for having a NDP/PC member?

Most members stated their riding was not ‘punished’ for not having a government member. At the same time, interestingly, long serving members gave at least one example of their riding having been ‘punished’. One member cited the closing of a college in his riding as an example. Another reported being denied funding for a college in the riding for years before it was finally funded. One member cited the stopping of construction of a highway in his riding as an example. A member observed that a government always has to worry about the optics of its actions – if it is perceived as being partisan, it will be in trouble.

• Does he/she find riding is passed over for funding in favour of nearby government-held ridings?

Most members denied their riding was passed over for funding in favour of nearby government-held ridings, or those held by a minister. One long serving member stated his riding did not get its fair share of funding when he was in opposition, but since his party became government, his riding gets its fair share. Another government member reported his riding is passed over for major funding because the connectors for the highways in his riding are in opposition-held ridings. One opposition member stated explicitly that government held ridings are favoured. A long-serving opposition member agreed that if his riding and that of a neighbouring government-held riding had to compete for the same funds, the government-held riding got the funds first. His riding would get funding in the second round of funding.

Most members gave examples of spending in their or other ridings that were politically motivated, or occurred (or did not) because of lobbying.

- A government member cited the instance of the government of the day passing a piece of legislation put forward by an opposition member in one day, in order to swing a riding to the government. The government had been resisting pressure to pass the legislation for a long time. The member noted this as a case of using public money to influence a political outcome. As a minister, when a local organization met him during budget preparation, he was able to have it put into the budget. However, when he was lobbied for funding by another municipality in his riding that would have looked good politically, he resisted. He also cited the example of a northern Ontario member lobbying to have Canadian content rules changed to benefit his riding which the government did not relent to.
An opposition member reported to benefiting by being next to a minister’s riding whose portfolio looks after funding of institutions in her riding.

One opposition member whose riding is split between two municipalities stated he stood to benefit since one municipality had a minister and the other had a very influential member.

A long serving opposition member reported having successfully lobbied a minister of the day to put a $5 million pipeline in riding even though it was not part of the government’s plan. The member reported an instance where he lobbied a minister against a policy that would have benefited his riding in the short term, but would have hurt the region as a whole. The minister ordered the reversal of his decision. The member reported his riding was well-funded when he was a government member.

A government member disagreed with a journalist’s observation about a funding announcement in his riding within 12 hours of his election. He denied his riding was being rewarded for having elected a government member and if anything, the funding would have been announced sooner had there been no election.

A long serving member stated that the current provincial government has bought off most lobby groups that would have opposed it. He said the government has used a combination of intimidation and buying support by passing legislation that would strengthen them (the lobby groups) by increasing their bargaining power. The member reported a hospital in his riding had been promised for many years, but upon becoming minister found that it was not even on the priority list. As minister, the member got it put on the priority list and got it built. The same member also reported stopping the regional government from putting up a dump in a municipality in the riding. The then Premier had a policy of seeing all MPPs for 15 minutes in private, one month before Christmas. The member raised the issue and the Premier issued a directive to resolve the issue. While there was no money involved, the member admitted bowing to lobby group pressure.

A government member proclaimed having obtained funding for various projects in his riding, on his website. However, he disagreed with terming the funding as pork even though by my definition and based on his reporting of lobby groups in his riding, it would be labeled as such.

An opposition member reported having lobbied the minister of the day, as a government backbencher, to have a hospital approved in his riding moved up the priority list. After losing government, the hospital contract was reworked, so it is now late.

A Queen’s Park staff member reported several examples of pork-barreling on the condition of anonymity:

- Minor road improvements were promised during an election by a member. The member raised the issue persistently with bureaucrats and ministers till finally at a meeting about major regional projects, he raised the issue constantly for the duration of the meeting. The minister relented in exasperation and directed staff to ensure the improvements were completed. The work was completed within a month

- A member used the duration of a two hour flight to talk about a multi-million dollar project needed for the riding, with the minister responsible. As a result, the project which was not even a government priority was put at the top of the priority list.
After a riding was lost, money allocated for a major transportation project was immediately re-allocated and the project was left incomplete.

Budgetary allocations were used to fund minor projects unrelated to budgetary allocation in closely-held ridings.

Two members from different parties told of how a former first minister had his riding included in an impoverished area so that it could tap into development funds which helped pave the roads in the riding. One member admitted to exaggerating reaction from his riding at times to ensure his riding got the biggest cheque possible.

Members, when told of the title of the paper, usually made comments about the nature and/or extent of pork in Ontario. One member stated MPPs are elected to argue for their communities, and since ordinary MPPs can not influence cabinet, they tend to focus on their ridings. The member stated that the press puts too much emphasis on a member’s ability to deliver. He noted that in the 1993 federal election, despite their ability to deliver, the governing party was reduced to just two seats. The member stated “politicians have to marry good government, good public policy and politics; consideration solely for politics will be bad for the politician. The political costs of expenditures have to be evaluated. Whether a particular item of expenditure is in the public interest and political interest has to be tested. Without political interest, there would be no need for politicians”. A member went so far as to say “it would be the death-knell for a minister to be perceived as directing funding to his/her riding”. Members stated that a government will suffer dire consequences if it is perceived as being partisan.

A member said “it used to be that 40 years ago, you had to be a Tory and a Mason to get a job at the Ministry of Transportation. We have come a long way from the 1950s”. He also shared a joke about pork-barrel spending in the province of Quebec under Premier Duplessis: Duplessis offered a community to build a bridge. On being told there was no river there, the Premier said “We will dig you a river”. An opposition member said “MPPs who say getting funding for their riding is a function of being in government are just lazy”. Another member observed wryly, “everybody who is looking for funding feels others are getting priority”.

Analysis and conclusion

Despite the examples of pork-barrel spending listed above, it can be safely stated that it is not as prevalent as in the United States. Party discipline and intense scrutiny of government spending keeps any politically motivated spending in check. As a result of standard procedures put in place to remove partisanship from determining spending decisions, government spending is mostly even-handed. Also, the longer a member has been around, the more his/her ability to lobby for funding for his/her riding. One member’s observation “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” does seem to bear truth, but the ‘squeak’ does not necessarily mean being vocal during Question Period. In fact, almost all members indicate working with a minister as being key to success in obtaining funding.

The interviews-summary shows that the government typically aims for ‘vote optimization’ – spending resources such that it receives enough votes to win or retain government. While no instances similar to the LIP were found, the one instance of the government passing legislation to affect the outcome of an election is somewhat similar to that of
the DREE example listed above. Longevity, it seems, somewhat negates the advice of Thompson and Stanbury to lobby government incumbents, since long serving MPPs are able to have funding directed to their ridings irrespective of whether they are in opposition or government.

So, is there still pork-barreling at Queen’s Park? I say yes, though not in the same style and extent as in the United States. Pork-barreling in Ontario is done in a unique way. Due to party discipline in a majority government, the government of the day decides priorities and directs funding to those priorities. Typically, these priorities are influenced by the groups that support the government, and have helped the government get elected usually through the provision of funds. As a result, once a party takes power, it is able to direct funding that will benefit these interest groups by setting up appropriate government programs. If a member lobbies for funding that falls under the category of a government priority, the money will likely flow irrespective of the affiliation of the member. Also, because of caucus and cabinet secrecy, internal pork-barreling – support of member’s being bought by directing funding to their riding – does not usually come to light. Thus, the theory of ‘vote optimization’ seems to bear out – governments spend enough resources generally, and setup programs to ‘pay back’ groups that supported them particularly, in order to hold on to government. In conclusion then, it can be said pork-barreling at Queen’s Park does exist.
## APPENDIX

Details of MPPs interviewed

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<tr>
<th>Name of MPP</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Member since</th>
<th>In opposition</th>
<th>In government</th>
<th>Minister</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sophia Aggelonitis</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Gilles Bisson</td>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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<td>2003 - present</td>
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<td>Rick Johnson</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Dave Levac</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>Phil McNeely</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>2001 - present</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>2007 - present</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>2007 - present</td>
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