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Clientelism and governance

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Abstract: Unlike much of the growing literature on political clientelism, this short paper contains mainly the author's general reflections on the broad issues of governance (or mis-governance including corruption), democracy, and state capacity that clientelism has an impact on. It then analyses how its incidence changes with the process of development, and the kind of policy issues that it generates. Finally, the paper suggests some research gaps in this literature.

Key words: contingent transfers, vote buying, discretionary vs. programmatic politics

JEL classification: D72, H11, O17, O43

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1 Introduction

The discussion on clientelism is often associated with the sociology of development, referring to patron-client relationships in hierarchical social networks. This paper is more on political clientelism, which involves an exchange relation between political agents, even though the political sphere in the development context—particularly in rural or face-to-face communities—is not independent of hierarchical social networks. The pervasiveness of vote buying and clientelistic ‘machine’ politics in traditional societies has been extensively documented in various case studies and political ethnographies.¹ Much of the literature on political clientelism, however, deals with its welfare effects or its impact on poverty. In this paper, we have instead some reflections on somewhat broader questions relating to governance, democracy, and state capacity.

Let me begin with a plan of this short paper. It will start with some definitions of clientelism, particularly distinguishing its treatment with a narrow definition used in this paper, both from the upfront payments of money or goods to the electorate before elections (which is implied in a frequent use of the term in both journalistic and scholarly writings) or from pork-barrel programmatic politics (which is the staple of, say, American legislative politics, on which there is a large literature in political science). I shall then discuss the effects of clientelism thus narrowly defined on the nature of democracy (including local democracy and the capture of the decentralization process), on corruption, and on state capacity. The paper will then briefly discuss the issues of political dynamics, how such clientelism has faded over time in the history of advanced democracies, though it seems to persist in corners of even rich countries. In particular, I would emphasize how, with economic development and expansion of transport, communications, and networks, the political demand for broader public goods escalates, away from the private goods and local public or club goods that the clientelist system traditionally delivers. The last part of the paper will address some policy issues, in view of the preceding discussion, along with pointing to some research gaps in the literature.

2 Definitions

The Wikipedia definition of clientelism states: ‘exchange systems where voters trade political support for various outputs of the public decision-making process.’ Political clientelism thus involves an exchange between voters and politicians. We will take a rather narrow definition of such clientelism, referring to a discretionary provision of private benefits by government officials and political parties selectively to particular groups of citizens, in exchange for their votes. As Hicken (2011) argues, the key element in such a definition is the contingent and reciprocal nature of the exchange.

This definition significantly differs from the standard use of the term which includes the upfront payments (usually unconditional) of money or goods (alcohol, food, mobile phone, other consumer durables, etc.) to the electorate as inducement to vote in a particular way. Our definition instead involves post-election delivery promises conditional on political support in the election.

In any case in pre-election handouts there is often competition among candidates, so these handouts may not be effective in getting votes—as in competitive advertising, it is mainly to

¹ For an extensive survey of these studies, see Hicken (2011).

neutralize the handouts by other candidates. (We are, of course, excluding here possible cases of reciprocally motivated voters who feel obliged to vote, out of a social norm of gift exchange and loyalty, for a candidate from whom they have first accepted a handout before the election).² Post-election transfers induce the voters to vote for the candidate who they personally believe is likely to win. The role of voter expectations about a candidate's win probability can lead to multiple equilibrium in theoretical models of such clientelism.

Looked at from a situation of repeated interactions over a length of time, of course, pre-election and post-election cases will blur. The critical issue is not the timing of benefits, but whether delivery of goods or services to citizens is conditioned by politicians on their support by particular voters.

How do politicians make sure how a client voted in conditions of ostensible secret ballots? Not perfectly, but often substantially through various indirect mechanisms: (marked) ballots handed out by party operatives (I believe still legal in countries like Argentina, Uruguay, and Panama), group sanctions, public signals by clients of political support (like participation in partisan election rallies), snapshots of the ballot cast in the voter's cell phone in some areas, and most importantly, socially influential local brokers who intermediate in directing votes to particular parties—there is a great deal of evidence of such broker mediation for Delhi by Harriss (2005) and Jha et al. (2007), for Mumbai by Bjorkman (2013), for urban India in general by Auerbach and Thachil (2018), for urban Mexico by Rizzo (2015), and so on. As Rizzo argues, 'brokers are not only instrumental in helping parties win elections, but in helping governments govern.' People in their turn approach such brokers when they need the politician's intervention in getting access to public services (and also in procuring the appropriate identification documents that they require for such services). There is thus often a hierarchical interlinkage between political patronage and social patronage mechanisms, wherein social patrons act as brokers, delivering votes of their clients to parties in exchange for payments or post-election delivery promises by political parties. Larreguy et al. (2015) provide detailed evidence from municipal elections in Mexico in the period 1994–2010 that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the clientelistic party par excellence, achieved greater political support in rural communal land areas with a better match between the jurisdictions of the communal areas controlled by brokers and electoral constituencies. Hicken and Nathan (2020) have pointed out that the literature underestimates the difficulty of individual vote monitoring in many cases, and that we often have to discuss clientelism in a context of imperfect commitment of voters (and politicians), particularly because for the politician it may still be a better use of their resources than the plausible alternatives. In any case, more often than not the politician is mainly interested in his rough guess of the aggregate voting behaviour of a neighbourhood or small community of people than the precise individual political action.

We should also draw a distinction between clientelist politics and pork-barrel (and hence distortionary) programmatic politics. American politics is often characterized by congressmen bringing some local public goods or club goods colourfully described as 'pork' (like a highway or military contract) to their districts. But this is not clientelism by our definition; the benefit of say, a military base in a district is not distributed by the congressman's discretion depending on who among the voters voted for them, but by some explicit and enforceable rules for all citizens in the district with publicly observable eligibility rules. (Similar is the case of LDP politicians ensuring

² For such an example of reciprocal behaviour among recipients of political favours in Paraguay, see Finan and Schechter (2012).

agricultural protection in some prefecture in rural Japan). In some theoretical models and empirical work, this distinction between clientelist and programmatic politics is central.³

When formal institutions such as those clearly defined rules are absent, and/or courts to enforce them are weak, as is often the case in shanty towns and other fringes of cities, and in rural or remote areas of poor countries, political agents can then incentivize the people in such informal/discretionary situations to support them politically. Even if citizens may be aware of their entitlements, it may be hard for them to seek redress when these are denied. With a large informal sector of this kind, the space then emerges for clientelistic practices to appear: *de jure* formal entitlements can be selectively honoured by elected officials for their clients and denied to others.

This informal sector is somewhat different from what appears in the formal–informal distinction in labour markets familiar in development economics. It is informal in the sense of being outside the usual realm of government rules and regulations. It is more akin to what, in the political science literature of development governance, Chatterjee (2004) has called ‘political society’ (as distinct from civil society where associational life is governed by a traditional legal framework). In his ‘political society’, the members are ‘only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution’ (Chatterjee 2004: 38). Excluded from usual bureaucratic channels of public service, they often negotiate contingent and para-legal (or sometimes outright illegal) arrangements with the political powers, encroaching upon and reconstituting public space.

3 Clientelism and corruption

Since in much of the economics literature corruption is defined as abuse of public office for private gain, most exchange transaction for vote (the short-hand term ‘vote buying’ is often used for this) is by definition corrupt, as it often uses public money or services for political support that is privately beneficial for the politician. Some of the abuse may not directly involve money but takes the form of what is known as collusive corruption, where the politician ensures that the official looks the other way when some people in their local constituency violate rules like building codes or zonal restrictions, or help themselves to unauthorized electricity or water connections, or the politician channels government procurement to some high-cost local sources in their constituency.

Secondly, the mediating agency of brokers in the vote-buying transaction also enables or facilitates other acts of corruption. The ready access to brokers, by lowering the uncertainty of whom and how much to bribe, reduces the chances of detection as well as of breach of corrupt deals. This makes anti-corruption policies more difficult to implement. This has been discussed in the theoretical literature on corruption—see, for example, Bose and Gangopadhyay (2009); it is also backed up by the experimental literature.

In addition, Leight et al. (2020) show from experimental data that vote buying by politicians reduces voters’ willingness to punish politicians for corrupt rent seeking; politicians in turn respond by appropriating more rents. In general, vote buying can be expected to help in institutionalizing corruption.

³ See Bardhan and Mookherjee (2018); Bardhan et al. (2020). For an overview of this literature, see Bardhan and Mookherjee (2020).

Of course, how you look at the impact of vote buying on corruption depends on the counterfactual. Think of two alternative regimes, in both rich businessmen want the politician to weaken regulations (say, environmental) that hurt their profits. In one regime, they pay taxes, and with appropriate disbursement of that public money the business-friendly politician buys votes of the poor to win election and carries out what the businessmen want. In the other regime, the businessmen contribute to the campaign chest of that politician, who uses it to saturate TV or social media with political commercials and persuade the voters in winning the election. One involves corrupt clientelism, the other does not. Bribery has been replaced by influence peddling or lobbying for regulations that are for sale, often quite legally.

4 The impact of clientelism on the state and democracy

(i) The essential feature of democracy, the rule of law, is obviously violated when the politician whom you have not supported can threaten withdrawal of benefits to which you are entitled, and that of non-discrimination in access to public services is disregarded.

(ii) Clientelistic dispensation of benefits gives the incumbent politician (with the levers of patronage-giving power and credibility of promise) an advantage in elections and thus hurts political competition, an essential aspect of democracy.

(iii) It turns rights-claiming citizens into supplicants for special favours, and thus erodes the nature of citizenship vital to a democracy. It is often observed that the publicly funded private goods that come as part of those special favours are tagged with a photograph of the patron so that the beneficiary can directly link them with the source of the benefit. In contrast, the quality of some public services (say, education, health, or nutrition programmes) is difficult for common voters to measure and assess, so politicians have more incentive to provide the private goods (or club goods) which the voters can easily and durably identify or tag and attribute to their benefactor.

(iv) It encourages local tyranny of the political patron or that of the broker who intermediates; thus, local democracy remains underdeveloped, and attempts at genuine decentralization are aborted. Such local tyranny lasts longer when the clientelist system is organized around ethno-cultural mobilization of clients, who face socially limited exit opportunities.

(v) Under such circumstances, politics often gets organized around some individual leaders and their coterie, inhibiting the formation of mass organizations like fully functioning political parties, which are the key political agents of a democracy. When voters are mainly swayed by personal payoffs from individual politicians, broad party affiliations of politicians or programmatic identification of parties matter much less. There is also frequent party switching by politicians sometimes taking their client base in tow. This kind of personalization of politics by inhibiting the formation of durable institutionalized political parties can clearly stunt the democratic process.

(vi) Democracy is not just about policy outcomes (like how much benefits citizens get) but in an important way about procedural rules of accountability like 'due process', while clientelism is about getting the outcome through murky, person-dependent channels.

(vii) This also delays the building of an impersonal bureaucracy⁴ with well-defined rules and modes of functioning and their professionalized career paths, which is an essential ingredient of state capacity. Instead, it encourages a supine politicized collusive official cadre, side-lining more professional people. It is not a coincidence that in areas where clientelism thrives, the state is often organizationally weak. Holland (2016), however, argues that weaknesses in state capacity may owe partly to unwillingness of elected politicians to enforce regulations rather than an inherent lack of capacity, with examples from a number of Latin American countries.

Even at the micro individual level, Fergusson et al. (2020) show with large-scale panel survey data that, in Colombia, vote buying, as a measure of clientelism, and tax evasion, as a measure of state weakness, are highly correlated.

(viii) In some of the literature on state capacity, it is presumed that state capacity (often measured by tax-GDP ratio) is low when people do not pay taxes, because they do not expect to get public goods in return. This *quid pro quo* is not very relevant in situations of extreme poverty, where most people are below the threshold of (at least) income taxation. The exchange in which poor people in a democratic country are involved in such a context is that of their political support in return for the services provided by politicians. This informal understanding is the essence of clientelism, which clearly does not help in building generalized or multilateral trust between people and the state. It is also observed that when politicians are mainly interested in narrow and contingent exchanges with some sections of the people, the better-off people tend to lose their stake in public services and their trust in government. There is evidence from Nepal and South Africa that a shift from narrow targeted programmes to more wide-based universal programmes in the last decade has been associated with a significant rise in trust in government and in the tax-GDP ratio in those countries.

(ix) Is clientelism related to the rise of populism, challenging liberal democracy, that we have seen all around? We do not have direct evidence on this but theoretically, one can spot some indirect links. Populism is often associated with two distinct phenomena. Economists associate it with short-termism, where long-term interests of the economy are neglected. As has been shown by much empirical work, clientelism often leads to under-provision of public goods, which more often is related to neglect of long-term needs of an economy. In this sense, the effect of clientelism is consistent with the economist's characterization of populism.

However, there is a distinct political-science interpretation of populism, where a leader, supposed to 'embody' the popular will, rides roughshod over due process and the rules and institutions of representative government. As explained in (vi) above, clientelism is consistent with this interpretation of populism as well. In many cases, clientelism may prepare the ground for such populism. Also, populist leaders often operate outside established political organizations like traditional mass-based political parties, which is consistent with our point (v) above.

5 Institutional dynamics

Historically, as countries develop, clientelistic practices in general decline and tend to be replaced by programmatic politics and the rule of law. But some remnants linger, as they have in parts of southern Italy and rural Japan, and in state and municipal politics in parts of the US—see for

⁴ For example, in Brazil, Colonnelli et al. (2020) find that patronage is linked to lower levels of quality of public servants.

example Stanton (2003) for a vivid account of the state of Rhode Island in the period 1970–2000 under Providence mayor Buddy Cianci.

There are different ways in which development undermines clientelist politics—some of these affecting demand from voters for clientelism, others affecting supply of it by politicians.

- (a) As voter income rises, vote price goes up, and after a point vote buying becomes too expensive for politicians.
- (b) Increasing connectivity and mobility raise exit options and weaken social networks in traditional face-to-face communities, reducing the ability of brokers to monitor and control voters, minimize their opportunism, and mediate clientelist transactions. More access to information sources makes people also more aware of the *social* costs of vote buying, but such awareness may not be effective as long as the *private* gains under the given circumstances remain significant.
- (c) Growth of the organized commercial (private or public) sector reduces dependence of voters on local leaders for their livelihoods and for insuring against various risks. As opportunities for risk pooling and risk diversification increase, access to commercial insurance increases, and dependence on the local broker for emergency help of all kinds declines. This process, however, can be quite slow.
- (d) Improvement in infrastructural facilities may also reduce some risks faced by households, which may lower their dependence on local patrons. Bobonis et al. (2017) show that reduced household vulnerability following the allocation of residential water cisterns in drought-prone areas significantly decreased requests for private benefits from local politicians.

[Both (c) and (d) are examples of clientelism arising from the need for local risk mitigation. Even though we are showing them as examples of how clientelism changes over time with the development of risk-mitigating institutions and services, this is also apparent in some cross-regional comparisons. An interesting example is provided by Heath and Tillin (2017). They draw on a tightly controlled comparison arising from the recent bifurcation of a state within the Indian federal system into two units that have demonstrated marked differences in institutional development post-division. With a survey administered in villages across the new state boundary, they show that in otherwise similar areas and among similar people with similar socio-economic characteristics, in the area with more institutional certainty in delivery of public services, citizens are less responsive to vote buying or clientelism.]

- (e) Digital technology (like IT, GIS) may increase the ability to pinpoint delivery of programmatic goods, lowering the dependence on discretion by local patrons.
- (f) The graduation from clientelist to programmatic politics shares similar issues as in the graduation from relation-based institutions to rule-based institutions. As Li (2003) has pointed out, relation-based institutions may have low fixed costs (given the pre-existing social relationships between, say, the broker and the client and the avoidance of contractual transaction costs, public information, and verification costs of more rule-based institutions) but may have high and rising marginal costs (particularly of private monitoring), as scale upgrading involves successively weaker relational links. So, with scale, the clientelist systems, like relation-based institutions, lose their advantage.

- (g) As the economy moves from agriculture to manufacturing and services, the externalities of public goods and infrastructure become salient in most non-farm production, and the under-provision of public goods under clientelist systems becomes costly.
- (h) As people become better off, they can afford to wait for longer-term benefits of public goods over the short-term private goods that the local patrons give them to get their votes.

One should not take the impression from the above that the process is one-way, from development to decline in clientelism. Effects going in the opposite direction are also likely, given the arguments and evidence for how substitution of clientelistic by programmatic politics is likely to improve governance, raise spending on health and education, and generate public goods rather than direct private transfers.

6 Policy issues

While transition from clientelism may be an outcome of development, the process is uncertain, non-linear, and slow. What are the ways of accelerating the process of transcending clientelism, apart from the obvious need for tightening ballot secrecy and making it difficult to identify voting results from booths in particular neighbourhoods?

- (a) Historically, in some countries, successful national or supra-local programmes have sometimes worked in breaking the grip of local patronage politics. In the US, large federal non-discretionary entitlement programmes like Social Security and New Deal of the 1930s diminished the hold of local clientelistic machine politics in many cities. The costly insurance provided by local patrons became less necessary. More recently, we have evidence that a large-scale conditional cash transfer programme like Bolsa Familia in Brazil and the rural land title programme PROCEDURE in Mexico reduced the incumbency advantage of local patrons—see Dower and Pfutze (2015), Frey (2015), and de Janvry et al. (2014).

Of course, this leaves open the question of what drove the political motivation for incumbents benefiting from clientelistic practices to implement entitlement programmes that would undermine those practices. The answer to that question varies from one historical context to another. For example, de Janvry et al. (2014) ascribe the motivation for PROCEDURE as appearing from suggestions of technocratic economists within the PRI administration who were concerned to implement land reforms that would raise productivity of Mexican farmers and allow them to compete better with North American farmers, as NAFTA came into effect from the mid-1990s onward.

- (b) This also suggests that some proposed universal (as opposed to the usual targeted) public welfare policies in poor countries, like universal basic income, universal health care, universal child care, universal access to vocational training programmes, etc., launched on a supra-local level, can erode the support base of local patrons who often capture local targeted welfare policies.
- (c) Since the clientelist system uses a pliant and politicized bureaucracy, administrative reform to correct this is a policy priority. Reforms that improve the autonomy of administrators from political intervention both in recruitment and promotion, may make politicians' personalized transfer schemes more difficult to implement. Since programmatic politics

depends, as we have mentioned, on well-defined and enforced rules, a prerequisite for moving there is a reformed bureaucracy, judiciary, and police. Mukherji and Zarhani (2020) narrate a story of how a particular conjuncture of committed bureaucrats and politicians brought about a major change in the hitherto clientelist politics of (the undivided) state of Andhra Pradesh in India toward one of the most successful cases of implementation of a national-level welfare policy.

- (d) As discussed in the previous section, major improvements in infrastructure (for example, roads and telecommunication), by increasing the exit option for remote villagers, can help them in escaping the clutches of local patrons.
- (e) There is also evidence that information campaigns and public deliberation in town hall or village meetings are useful in reducing the incidence of clientelism—see, for example, Vicente (2014) and Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2013). Vicente and Wantchekon (2009) conclude that their experiments suggest that policies that empower women (who are less responsive to clientelist platforms than men) and voter education initiatives both play a role in reducing vote buying. Cruz et al. (2021) combine a structural model and a large-scale field experiment in Philippine mayoral elections to show that voters’ response can be influenced in a non-clientelistic direction, even though policy-based campaigning is rare in the Philippines, and campaigns centre around vote buying and clientelism. Dissemination of information about candidates’ quality and policy platform turns out to be remarkably effective in changing voters’ evaluation of them. But the authors stress that to sustain such informational campaigns, one may need the involvement of credible and truly independent media or non-governmental organizations.

7 Some research gaps in the existing literature

- (a) The distinction between clientelist and programmatic politics is not always sharp; there may be a whole range of institutional arrangements in between that need to be more carefully studied.
- (b) We do not have enough evidence on why vote buying is effective in some areas but not in others.
- (c) Similarly, we do not yet fully understand why the institutional dynamics mentioned above do not work always or in all regions, why clientelism lingers in many cases in spite of general economic advance. In general, there are different types of non-linearities in the relation between economic development and political distortions.
- (d) In this paper, we have mostly discussed clientelism in the context of local governments. There may be a whole range of issues with the varying importance of regional and central governments, and clientelism may have different implications at different levels of governance. Bussell (2019) shows, on the basis of her field survey of the activities of legislators at the federal and provincial levels in India, that the legislators provide wide-ranging ‘constituency services’ which are remarkably independent of party affiliations or voter behaviour—sometimes, of course, it is difficult for higher-level politicians to reliably monitor those affiliations and behaviour. It is possible that partisan clientelism declines at higher levels of government. This is an empirical matter that needs to be checked in different countries and contexts. Also, in case local governments are more prone to clientelism, how does it affect the standard debates on

fiscal federalism? We have cited above cases of federal entitlement programmes and property rights reforms eroding clientelistic practices; does this suggest some reform of the structure of existing federalism, without harming the cause of devolution?

- (e) The literature on decentralization in developing countries has often referred to cases of elite capture, in the sense of diversion of programme benefits to non-target (often better-off) groups. Clientelism involves diversion of benefits to some narrow groups (who may be poor) with the understanding of contingent electoral support. The relationship between clientelism and elite capture is not always clear. They often co-exist, but is the relationship between the two one of substitution or complementarity?
- (f) In the discussion on policy issues, there has not been enough work on the effects on clientelism of changes in electoral rules (like on competition, term limits, financing) and in administrative regulations (devolution of responsibilities, rules versus discretion).
- (g) Does clientelism have implications for the selection of political leaders or for the allocation of talent between the private and public sectors?
- (h) What kind of empirical evidence do we have for the usual implication of clientelism as a source of incumbency advantage in elections?
- (i) Is there any evidence that incumbent politicians have a vested interest in preserving discretionary informal systems and preventing the installation of rule-based systems? Does this alienate the middle class who usually belong to the more formal part of the polity and discourage their participation in the democratic process?
- (j) More field evidence on the role of brokers who act as an intermediary between the politicians and citizens will be useful. Much of the existing work is on intermediation on the access of individual citizens to private goods or jobs or personal services (like getting government identification certificates or hospital beds). There has been some recent work in urban slums—for example, that by Auerbach and Thachil (2018) on mediation by brokers on local public (or club) goods. They also show that the citizens are not always stuck with a given embedded local intermediary and may sometimes have choice over intermediaries within their local community. In urban slums, compared to remote or isolated villages, the clients may have more agency and exit options, along with more competition among intermediaries. In this context, it may be interesting to study if or how this mediation in access over time graduates from traditional narrow clientelism to demands for more general public goods, or the (possibly slow) evolution into more programmatic politics, along with changes in reputational incentives for politicians to reach out to larger groups.

There are many such important questions left open in the literature, and there is also a particular dearth of rigorous quantitative studies (with appropriate identification strategies) for answering most questions. Those strategies may have to be more complex because of the usual two-way interaction between clientelism and pitfalls of governance. More experimental evidence is appearing in the very recent literature.

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