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WIDER Working Paper 2021/155

Contract clientelism

How infrastructure contracts fund vote-buying

Alisha Holland¹ and Will Freeman²

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Abstract: Where does the money come from to buy votes? We argue that an important source of funds for vote-buying comes from ‘contract clientelism’, or the provision of public contracts to private firms in exchange for campaign donations. Using quantitative data on Colombian infrastructure contracts, we demonstrate that municipalities exhibit an ‘electoral contracting cycle’ in which incumbents assign low-quality contracts while on the campaign trail. Contract manipulations are more common in municipalities with higher reports of clientelist activity. Qualitative evidence from two Colombian cities, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, reinforce that infrastructure contractors provide a critical source of campaign finance and can create subnational political monopolies. The main contribution is to question the classic tension between clientelistic distribution and public goods provision. Politicians need to assign public contracts to secure funds for clientelistic handouts but, in so doing, they often promote low-quality public goods and weaken local states.

Key words: public contracts, campaign finance, vote-buying, clientelism, infrastructure, Colombia, public goods

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1 Introduction

Where does the money come from to buy votes? One possibility is that incumbent politicians manipulate state goods and services to fund electoral clientelism. But challengers cannot access state resources, and many governments increasingly restrict the discretionary use of state funds (Arriola 2012; Hagopian et al. 2008). Another possible answer comes from political parties. Parties may use dues collected from members and donations to finance vote-buying efforts. However, clientelism persists in countries where parties are weak and under-resourced (Kramon 2017; Muñoz 2019) and where public campaign finance is paltry (Bruhn 2016).

This paper argues that public contracting, particularly around infrastructure contracts, provides an important source of campaign funds that fuel vote-buying efforts. Incumbents assign contracts while they are on the campaign trail in exchange for donations from infrastructure projects in a temporal pattern which we refer to as an ‘electoral contracting cycle’. Over time, incumbents can build sustained relationships with contractors that attenuate electoral contracting cycles. Challengers can promise to assign contracts once in office. However, promises of future contracts are less credible than those signed by incumbents prior to elections and therefore extract fewer resources.

The connection between public contracting and vote-buying highlights an overlooked deleterious consequence of clientelism on states. The need to buy votes leads to the rushed assignment of public contracts prior to campaigns and the political assignment of them after elections. The manipulation of public contracting tends to be associated with lower-quality infrastructure projects. It can also cement local political monopolies that use their access to contracts to construct vote-buying machines, tilt the playing field against opposition parties, and undermine government transparency.

No smoking gun exists to test the relationship between infrastructure contracts and vote-buying. We instead look for distinct empirical predictions in patterns of infrastructure contracting and vote-buying using original quantitative and qualitative data from Colombia. Colombia is a decentralized democracy in which politicians have substantial control over local infrastructure contracting, such as roads, schools, community centres, and hospitals. Clientelism remains widespread even as institutionalized political parties have weakened: one in five Colombian voters report that they sell their votes, and no discernible social desirability bias prevents them from admitting it (Fergusson et al. 2018).

Within Colombia, we use a database on all infrastructure contracts from 2011 to 2019 to test whether infrastructure contracts serve to fund vote-buying efforts. First, we show an electoral contracting cycling in which valuable contracts are assigned directly to favoured builders as politicians leave office. Second, while these contracts could reflect an effort to finish long-planned projects, we demonstrate that end-of-term contracts tend to be lower in quality, as judged by subsequent completion delays. Third, we find a positive association between the prevalence of vote-buying and electoral contracting cycles. Municipalities where politicians assign contracts as they leave office also have more reports of clientelistic activities, all else equal.

After presenting suggestive quantitative evidence, we turn to qualitative case studies to probe the role that infrastructure contracts play in the persistence of clientelism in Colombia. We selected two cities traditionally known for clientelistic politics that differ in their levels of political competition: Barranquilla and Santa Marta. We interviewed local politicians, private sector leaders, reporters, activists, and residents to understand the role that infrastructure contracts and

clientelism play in political campaigns. In Barranquilla, we demonstrate how relationships with infrastructure companies have been critical to the development of a local political monopoly that depends heavily on clientelism. The long-term relationship between politicians and contractors has attenuated electoral spikes in contracting and resulted in plentiful and necessary (if overpriced) infrastructure projects. In contrast, local politics have become increasingly competitive in Santa Marta, where a new centre-left political movement has emerged to challenge the city's traditional elite. Mayors have manipulated infrastructure contracts to fund their campaigns and pursued numerous late-term infrastructure projects with serious execution problems. However, politicians avoid vote-buying activities to separate themselves from traditional politicians and instead tend to spend the funds on publicity and campaign events.

The main contribution of this paper is to show that the tension between private and public goods may be overstated. The standard view in political science is that clientelism encourages politicians to focus on providing particularistic benefits rather than public goods to improve general welfare (Bates 1981; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016; Kitschelt 2000; Medina and Stokes 2007; Stokes 2005). For instance, Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2016: ch. 7–8) argue that countries with political machines are more likely to favour targeted social spending that can be directed at individual supporters at the expense of social infrastructure projects that provide general benefits. But if politicians use contracts for local public goods to fund vote-buying machines, then public goods—and particularly infrastructure contracts—may be complementary to clientelistic politics. The deleterious consequences of clientelism do not stem from a shift away from public goods provision but, rather, from the quality of public goods and political competition. Infrastructure contracts signed for campaign purposes may do less to advance social welfare and result in execution problems. Contract clientelism can reduce economic competition among firms. It can also reshape political competition, in some cases cementing subnational political monopolies and making it harder for competitors to offer political alternatives.

2 A theory of contract clientelism

Where does the money come from to fund vote-buying? Large sums of money—and primarily cash—are used to buy votes and turnout throughout the developing world. Yet, public campaign finance tends to be paltry and declining (Yadav 2011: 40–41). Economic reforms and rule-based social spending have put greater restrictions on the use of public resources to provide clientelistic favours (Greene 2007; Hagopian et al. 2008; Morgan 2011). We suggest that understanding clientelism requires closer attention to one of the main sources of funding, public procurement. We call the provision of a public contract in exchange for contributions to fund vote or turnout buying ‘contract clientelism’. In so doing, we attempt to connect research on clientelism to work on campaign finance, business politics, and public procurement.

We take a standard definition of clientelism as the exchange of an electoral behaviour (i.e. turnout or voting) for particularistic benefits like money, in-kind goods, or employment (Kitschelt 2000). Yet, we extend the electoral behaviour to include campaign donations and the benefits to involve the assignment of a contract. The key feature is that politicians provide contracts prior to an election *contingent* on a contractor's donation. The funds provided in turn may be used to pay for critical campaign expenditures, including vote-buying.

Parties depend on networks of brokers to identify voters to target, deliver the goods, and in some cases, monitor electoral behaviour (Mares and Young 2016; Stokes et al. 2013). While some brokers have detailed knowledge about the partisan inclinations, reciprocity, and social ties of their clients (Calvo and Murillo 2004; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016; Finan and Schechter 2012; Ravanilla et

al. 2020), other brokers are hired largely as a distribution network with limited information on their clients (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015; Kramon 2017; Muñoz 2019; Nathan and Brierley 2020).

The type of excludable goods provided in clientelistic exchanges differs across contexts. In contexts with few restrictions on the use of state resources, incumbent politicians manipulate the targeting and priority for public programmes, as has been emphasized in studies of clientelism of the Peronist Party in Argentina (Weitz-Shapiro 2014) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico (Greene 2007; Magaloni 2008). Embedded brokers may work to tailor the particular goods provided to their clients' specific vulnerabilities (Nichter 2018; Zarazaga 2014). In contexts with stricter rules on state spending or weaker brokerage networks, politicians often provide cash or durable goods to voters. The cost of buying electoral behaviours can be quite high; for instance, estimates run from US\$10 to US\$80 depending on the competitiveness of the district in Colombia (El Tiempo 2019) and US\$18 in the rural Philippines (Ravanilla et al. 2021). Incumbents who cannot tap into state coffers to fund vote-buying—as well as opposition politicians across contexts—face a challenge to finance clientelism.

Despite the monetary resources needed, work on clientelism has been largely disconnected from that on campaign finance and business politics. In part, this reflects that the study of campaign finance remains in its infancy in developing countries due to a lack of data (Scarrow 2007). But rich studies have emerged on specific countries that mandate public disclosures, such as Brazil (Boas et al. 2014; Claessens et al. 2008; Lazzarini et al. 2011; Samuels 2002). Other studies look at the variation in formal campaign finance regulations and their effects on parties (Bruhn 2016; Cagé 2020; Hummel et al. 2019).

Standard models of campaign finance are also thought to apply poorly in developing countries. The conventional view is that firms provide donations in the hopes of future policy rewards. But most developing countries have few policy-oriented donors due to the weaker institutionalization of the policy process (Treisman 1998). For instance, Gulzar et al. (2020) show that most donors in Colombia contribute to multiple candidates in a single district rather than candidates from the same party across districts. This pattern is more consistent with a model in which firms engage in quid pro quo relationships where they hope to receive lucrative public contracts (or other jurisdiction-specific favours) if elected. Similarly, Boas et al. (2014) show that campaign donors are rewarded with construction contracts when their candidates win in Brazil. A similar pattern holds, in which donors receive 'small contracts' in the months following an election in Colombia (Gulzar et al. 2020). These exchanges, however, are non-credible. Candidates may lose or renege on their promises once in office. Just as with standard policy-oriented donors, uncertainty about the election can lead contractors to support multiple candidates and presumably provide only modest donations to each candidate.

The manipulation of public contracts often underwrites collusive state–business relations. Fazekas and Tóth (2016: 321) suggest public procurement is often the source of corrupt campaign finance in middle-income countries. Szakonyi (2020) shows that businesspeople often run for office in Russia to direct public contracts and policies to benefit their firms. Arriola (2012) offers a unique perspective on how the need to campaign against incumbent parties with access to state resources affects the opposition's organizing strategies and links with business. Taken to extremes, the manipulation of public procurement for campaign purposes can result in 'state capture' by business interests (Hellman et al. 2000: 11). However, the literature on clientelism largely focuses on contracts between politicians, brokers, and voters, and neglects the actors that finance vote-buying or the public contracting relationships that they often desire (Ch et al. 2019; Singer 2009).

Our argument is that a key source of campaign funds for clientelistic activities comes from the manipulation of public contracts *prior* to elections. We emphasize that politicians can develop more

credible commitments to firms by assigning public contracts before an election. Contracts tend to be overpriced so a percentage of the contract value can be kicked back to the politician as personal rents or campaign funds. Donors are assured that they have received their desired contract (or at least its assignment) so may be willing to donate larger amounts. Politicians can assign contracts in discretionary ways, such as writing the bid terms to favour certain firms or using non-competitive tender procedures, to guide contracts to their donors. Anecdotally, reports of such contract manipulations are common. In Peru, for example, Muñoz (2019: 72–73) provides qualitative evidence that the distribution of local public works prior to elections provides opportunities to extract resources that mayors then use for their campaigns and private wellbeing. As one politician from Santa Marta explained to us, ‘Here, they say that the most important voters are contractors, because they put up the capital to cover the costs of candidates’ campaigns’.¹

While any type of public contract is vulnerable to political manipulation, infrastructure contracts are ideal for campaign purposes. First, construction tends to be one of the largest industries in developing countries. Potential donors often own construction companies. In a creative illustration of this relationship, Kapur and Vaishnav (2013) use cement consumption as an indicator of real estate activity. They find that cement consumption drops prior to Indian elections because builders need to provide liquidity to politicians to finance their campaigns.²

Second, construction operates with large amounts of cash, which is particularly useful for vote-buying. An example of this dynamic comes from Figueroa (2020) who uses unique handwritten notebooks with daily records of cash bribes collected from Argentina’s Ministry of Planning. As elections drew near, bureaucrats collected cash bribes that construction companies provided in exchange for the assignment of public contracts. The cash then was delivered to party leaders and political bosses, presumably in large measure to buy votes. Similarly, infrastructure contracts were used to provide cash to vote-buying machines on Colombia’s coast prior to Juan Manuel Santos’s tight second-round re-election campaign in 2014. The Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht operated a highway concession, Ruta de Sol II, which managed millions of cash tolls. Odebrecht billed for phantom contracts that it did not complete and then channelled toll money to Senator Ñoño Elías, who confessed to distributing bags of cash to local brokers to buy turnout (La Silla Vacía 2018).

Third, infrastructure contracts are idiosyncratic and difficult to monitor. Many developing countries have adopted standard contracts for commodities, from medicine to school lunches, that are easy to benchmark against each other. But each infrastructure project involves unique geographic and building specifications that create monitoring challenges and reasons for the renegotiation of contracts.³

We expect that incumbents prefer to sign contracts while they are on the campaign trail, for several reasons. First, it is less likely that the media or citizens can detect any harms from misguided contract assignments. If contracts are assigned to donors that then fail to start or complete promised projects, then politicians may face sanctions at the polls. Late-term assignments prevent the discovery of any political manipulations. Following a similar logic, Pierskalla and Sacks (2018) actually find that infrastructure expenditures decrease in Indonesia in election year due to the increase in scrutiny and distraction of politicians. Second, politicians prefer to create incentives for

¹ Interview with mayoral candidate, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta.

² Their paper emphasizes dynamics closer to standard lobbying: private builders require the aid of politicians to get zoning changes and licensing agreements because land is a highly regulated commodity in India. Construction companies thus donate in the hopes of later policy favours.

³ For a nice discussion of idiosyncrasy and contractual challenges in infrastructure, see Lagunes (2017).

contractors to work towards their re-election. While contractors want a contract assignment, they also generally prefer incumbents to stay in office to ensure that the project is done on favourable terms and reduce the chances of project cancellation. They have stronger reasons to work for the politician's or party's re-election if a contract still needs to be executed. Contractors can help politicians on the campaign trail by mobilizing their employees and spreading information about the campaign. Money to buy votes, of course, does not come exclusively from contracts assigned immediately prior to elections. Politicians can assign contracts to potential donors at any point during their time in office and save any rents for future campaign expenses. But significant pre-electoral spikes in contracting provide strong evidence of a relationship between contracting and clientelist vote-buying. We therefore predict that:

H1: Politicians should increase the direct assignment of infrastructure contracts at the end of their term.

This prediction differs from research that stresses the political benefits of credit claiming around infrastructure projects. Most work on infrastructure predicts that politicians assign contracts early in their tenure so that they can inaugurate projects as they are on the campaign trail (see Samuels 2002). Such a 'visibility theory' assumes that politicians aim to cut the ribbon or at least lay the bricks for physical projects (Johannessen 2016; Mani and Mukand 2007; Marx 2016). If, instead, politicians are motivated by the need for campaign funds, then they will assign contracts in their last months in office. This leaves politicians no way to finish the projects that they contract but cements their commitments to campaign donors.

Another possibility is that infrastructure projects simply take time to plan. Politicians may work on an investment project during their tenure but only have the contracts ready at the end. If this is the case, then contracts assigned just before leaving office would be high-quality projects, with similar or better features compared to those assigned in the rest of a politician's term. In contrast, if infrastructure projects are rushed to extract campaign funds, then they should be lower-quality projects. We therefore expect that:

H2: Infrastructure contracts assigned prior to an election are lower-quality projects; they have longer delays and budget increases in execution.

Contractual manipulations can be used for multiple purposes. Politicians may simply steal funds at the end of their terms. Indeed, work on the 'incumbency curse' in developing countries finds that voters turn against incumbents when political parties and horizontal accountability mechanisms are weak (Klašnja and Titunik 2017; Weaver 2020). Voters may expect politicians to engage in corruption as they exit office. While we cannot separate out the use of contracts for private and electoral purposes, we expect that end-of-term infrastructure contracts are used at least in part to fund clientelism. We therefore expect that:

H3: Districts in which politicians assign infrastructure projects prior to elections have higher levels of reported vote-buying.

The use and timing of contract clientelism may depend on the structure of political competition. Corstange (2016) highlights how the targeting and strategies around clientelism may look quite different in competitive and non-competitive areas. Canen et al. (2020) show that firms in Benin choose 'direct' mechanisms of local state capture such as bribes to politicians and campaign financing in less electorally competitive districts and 'indirect' mechanisms such as lobbying through media investments in closely contested districts. It is less clear how to apply this logic to the timing of contract clientelism, however. One possibility is that limited political competition attenuates the electoral cycle around contract assignments, as firms and politicians develop longer-term relationships that surmount credible commitment problems. Tight elections make it more

valuable for incumbents to assign contracts prior to the election to have their contributors work towards their re-election. Competition may also increase the costs of campaigning and the need for vote-buying in ways that encourage contract manipulations. If this is the case, then we expect that:

H4: Competitive districts have sharper electoral contracting cycles.

A counterargument is that low levels of political competition are necessary for politicians to manipulate public contracts. For instance, Broms et al. (2019) use data from municipalities in Sweden to show that when one party dominates local politics, it uses more restricted public procurement processes. This logic would suggest that politicians are more capable of manipulating contracts—and possibly also of organizing brokerage networks to buy votes—in less competitive districts. If the ability to manipulate contracts depends on competition, then an alternative pattern would emerge in which we would observe stronger electoral contracting cycles and more vote-buying when a single party dominates.

3 Context: subnational elections in Colombia

We examine the role of infrastructure contracts in clientelism in Colombia, a decentralized democracy that reformed its political system and state institutions to reduce vote-buying beginning in the late 1980s. Colombian politics were long dominated by Liberal and Conservative Parties known for clientelistic linkages. Institutional reforms and the decline of organized parties, however, did not bring an end to vote-buying. About 20 per cent of Colombian voters admit to selling their votes, which puts Colombia slightly above the Latin American average (Fergusson et al. 2018).⁴

Colombia undertook a number of democratizing reforms, including the popular election of mayors in 1988 and governors in 1992. Colombian mayors and governors can be elected to a single four-year term by first-past-the-post rules.⁵ Although not a federal system, Colombia radically increased the powers and share of revenues going to subnational authorities in the 1991 Constitution (Eaton 2006; Falleti 2010: ch. 4). Mayors took over responsibility for service provision and basic infrastructure like schools, hospitals, and local roads. Electoral reforms, such as the elimination of discretionary congressional subsidies, a single electoral district, and low thresholds to register congressional lists, also aimed to weaken the control of traditional political parties and their regional brokers (Crisp and Ingall 2002; Muñoz and Dargent 2011).

The introduction of subnational elections has been blamed for the deinstitutionalization of the Colombian party system. By 2002, the share of seats going to non-traditional parties in Congress rose to 43 per cent (Rueda 2017: 168). Politicians gained greater independent resources and recognition that obviated the need for party organizations (Dargent and Muñoz 2016). In urban politics, in particular, politicians began to run on personal brands rather than party labels (Pasotti 2009).

⁴ The literature increasingly uses list experiments to construct more accurate estimates of the percentage of people who report having received offers to influence their vote choice: 12 per cent in Argentina in 2001 (Brusco et al. 2004, 69), 15 per cent in Mexico in 2000 (Cornelius 2004: 50), 12 per cent in Nigeria in 2007 (Bratton 2008), and 25 per cent in Kenya in 2007 (Kramon 2011: 1).

⁵ Members of legislative bodies (department assemblies and municipal councils) are elected by party-list proportional representation.

Clientelism transformed along with the party system in Colombia. Voting is voluntary, with low turnout rates in municipal elections. As predicted in theoretical models, this produces substantial ‘turnout buying’ in which politicians aim to get voters to their rallies and polling stations (Gans-Morse et al. 2013). A ‘fractionalization’ of clientelism occurred in which traditional parties gave way to individual personalities who monitor turnout, as well as group votes at the polling-station level (Gutiérrez Sanín and Guevara 2000; Pizarro Leongómez 2002; Rueda 2017). As parties have weakened, brokers rarely show strong partisan loyalties. Instead, they often come from community or interest organizations and agree to mobilize their bloc of votes for a candidate in exchange for upfront resources and future electoral promises (Eaton and Chambers-Ju 2014; Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015).

The transformation of local politics has been particularly stark where traditional political parties have commanded vote-buying machines, such as Barranquilla and Santa Marta on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. Prior to democratizing reforms, family dynasties ruled the region and often acted as regional brokers for the dominant Liberal Party (Caicedo 2008; López 2010; Tate 2018). Brokers distributed in-kind inducements, often based on the goods owned by local families, such as construction materials or small plots of land. Decentralization fragmented the local party system into dozens of elite-controlled, personalist political machines. It also resulted in an ‘evolution of clientelism’⁶ as local candidates became ‘experts in vote-buying’.⁷

Where the money comes from to buy votes is less clear since the weakening of the party system. Colombia has strict campaign finance limits and limits on corporate donations, but no public financing of subnational campaigns. The rules are challenging to enforce and set unrealistic caps compared to the costs of actual campaigns. One study found that senate campaigns cost around US\$1 million, despite legal caps set at US\$150,000 (La Silla Vacía 2018). Another possibility is that armed actors or organized crime provide campaign funds. In the 2000s, armed actors sometimes directly funded mayoral campaigns (Eaton 2006) and right-wing paramilitaries formed close connections with local politicians, especially on the Caribbean coast (Ortiz 2008: 6). But these relationships were disrupted through the demobilization of paramilitary groups in the 2000s and a peace deal with the country’s largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), in 2016. The risks associated with armed actors make them an unattractive source of funds for many candidates.

While public contracts are not the only source of campaign funds, Colombian authorities recognize that they are an important one. In 2005, the government passed the Electoral Guarantees Law (*Ley de Garantías Electorales*), a set of regulations meant to equalize the playing field for political competitors. Among other rules, it prohibited direct contracting—in which a politician chooses the winning bidder—in the three months prior to an election. The rules only apply to direct contracting, which means that politicians may use other contracting mechanisms to favour their donors or shift their contracting activity earlier in the year. Indeed, infrastructure firms report substantial demands for campaign contributions in exchange for contracts: 38 per cent reported that they have been asked to provide a bribe as a percentage of the contract value; 30 per cent have been asked to provide cash to a public official for a contract; and 27 per cent said that public entities write the bid terms to direct them to their political allies (CCI 2015). As we explain next,

⁶ Interview with civil society leader, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla. Interviewees suggested this was misunderstood even locally: ‘People believe that corruption is in the treasury. No, there’s no corruption there—it’s in contracting’.

Interview with Magdalena department politician, 7/25/2019, Santa Marta.

⁷ Interview with civil society leader, 7/4/2019, Barranquilla.

we use the desire to circumvent the electoral prohibition to understand the campaign use of infrastructure contracts.

4 Empirical strategy and data

To look at the use of infrastructure contracts to fund clientelism, we use data from Colombia's Electronic System for Public Contracting (*Sistema Electrónico para la Contratación Pública*, SECOP) (Colombia Compra Eficiente n.d.). Since 2011, state entities are required to publish their contracts through SECOP.⁸ We focus on contracts for services related to infrastructure projects, totalling 648,302 contracts from 2011 to 2019.⁹ A number of features of the contracts are available, including the size, contracting entity, contract modality (i.e., public tender, direct contract, minimum quantity, etc.), date of contract, cost overruns, and time overruns.

We first examine the electoral cycle around contracting. We estimate logit models for the probability that a contract is granted via direct contracting versus a competitive method in the month prior to the electoral prohibition. Our dependent variable takes on a value of '1' if a contract is issued through direct contracting and '0' otherwise (*Direct Contract*). Our key independent variable is an indicator variable for the month prior to the prohibition on contracting (*Guarantees Law*). We also include an indicator variable for whether a contract was issued by a national or subnational entity (*National Contract*). Our expectation is that subnational politicians are more likely to use direct contracting prior to regional elections, while no effect should be observed for national entities. We include month fixed effects to account for normal seasonality in contracting.¹⁰ We also include a fixed effect for the contract purpose which absorbs possible differences stemming from categories of infrastructure contracts.

To test our second hypothesis that contracts issued in the month prior to the electoral prohibition are lower quality, we measure whether a contract finished after its completion date (*Time Addition*) or went over budget (*Cost Addition*). We expect that rushed contracts have more time and cost overruns. Alternatively, if some projects simply take time to develop, those done at an end of a politician's term may be better planned with fewer problems down the line. Most contracts do not have time or cost additions, so we use zero-inflated negative binomial estimates to first predict whether a contract has a time addition, and then to examine the factors that determine how long the addition is. Cost additions are a continuous variable, so we focus on whether an addition was made using a linear probability model.

⁸ There are two separate databases: SECOP-I, which contains contracts from 2011–20, and SECOP-II, which contains contracts from 2015–20. The main difference is that SECOP-II allows public entities to register their processes directly into the system. While this eases data entry, it also results in substantial errors (i.e. many contract amounts are missing zeros or decimal points). We focus on the SECOP-I database given its longer coverage and higher quality and then use the SECOP-II as a robustness check.

⁹ Contracts related to infrastructure include: 1) construction components (*Componentes y Suministros para Estructuras, Edificación, Construcción y Obras Civiles*); 2) engineering services (*Servicios Basados en Ingeniería, Investigación y Tecnología*); 3) building services (*Servicios de Edificación, Construcción de Instalaciones y Mantenimiento*); 4) machines and construction accessories (*Maquinaria y Accesorios para Construcción y Edificación*); and 5) land and structures (*Terrenos, Edificios, Estructuras y Vías*). Building services is the most relevant to the idea of infrastructure construction but we choose not to limit the analysis given that component contracts are often administered at the same time, with similar logics.

¹⁰ This is a particular issue for national elections that fall in January, creating an overlap between known end-of-year contracting cycles (Liebman and Mahoney 2017).

We look at our third hypothesis that discretionary contracts are used to fund clientelism through municipal-level correlations between contract manipulations and vote-buying efforts. As an independent variable, we focus on the proportion of contracts awarded through direct contracting (*Direct Contracts*), which allowed politicians to pick the contract winner and therefore is easiest to extract campaign funds. We also include a measure of the total value of infrastructure contracts (*Total Contract Value*), given that substantial infrastructure investment (regardless of contractual form or timing) may allow politicians to engage in more clientelistic activities.

We operationalize clientelism as voter incidents reported to the Attorney General at the municipal level (*Clientelism Reports*). This measure extends beyond vote-buying to include complaints of turnout suppression, registration problems, undue influence, and so on, which are often related to attempts by political parties to buy votes or turnout.¹¹ Even using a more expansive definition, the measure has a highly skewed distribution with many zeros and low counts of events. We therefore estimate zero-inflated negative binomial models. Our expectation is that municipalities that rely more heavily on direct contracts or have more infrastructure contracts should also have more reports of clientelistic activities. We control for several municipal characteristics, such as the size of the budget (*Own Resources*), the poverty rate (*NBI*), population (*Size*), polling station size (*Polling*), and the multidimensional poverty index (*Poverty*). To examine our final hypothesis, we include a proxy for competition as the margin of victory between the winner and the runner-up (*Margin*). We also code whether the mayor's party ran for re-election (*Incumbent*).

The statistical models can only reveal an association between discretionary contracting and clientelistic behaviours. It is very possible that municipalities that engage in clientelism have weaker institutions that also allow for contractual manipulations, despite no direct connection between vote-buying and infrastructure contracts. We therefore turn to case studies in two Colombian cities to gain a richer understanding of how politicians develop relationships with contractors, how the timing of contracting varies with political competition, and the ways that money extracted from infrastructure contracts can be funnelled into campaigns. We focus specifically on Barranquilla and Santa Marta, two of the principal cities of Colombia's Caribbean coast. Both cities were governed by a small set of elite political families tied to the traditional parties until the institutional transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. Since the early 2000s, however, their local political dynamics have diverged. While a single family, the Char, has monopolized control over nearly all public institutions and the private sector in Barranquilla, local politics in Santa Marta have become increasingly competitive as the progressive *Fuerza Ciudadana* movement has won a series of close local elections.¹²

To explore the relationship between infrastructure contractors and politicians, we draw on more than 40 interviews conducted in the two cities using a 'snowball' sampling method. Interviews included local elites, such as members of traditional political families and chambers of commerce, as well as opposition activists, reporters, and neighbourhood-level brokers aligned with both incumbents and their critics. In addition, the insights draw on more than 100 elite interviews conducted with ministers, national politicians, control institutions, and construction companies in Colombia's capital, Bogotá.

Connecting infrastructure contracts to vote-buying presents several challenges even for qualitative work. As many of our interviewees emphasized, a large gap almost always exists between a

¹¹ This approach follows Rueda (2017), with the data updated to cover the 2011 to 2019 period.

¹² Observers described Barranquilla's current political system as 'an outlier in terms of the degree of elite alliances' (interview with expert from the Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE), 7/11/2019, Bogotá) and 'localized crony capitalism' (interview with local private sector leader, Barranquilla, 7/22/2019).

candidate's reported and actual campaign spending.¹³ Candidates for local office have strong incentives to hide the identity of their true financial backers for fear of legal investigation. Politicians and contractors instead tend to point the finger at the misdeeds of their competitors, raising concerns about the accuracy and quality of information. To mitigate these problems, we cross-reference interviewees' accounts and attempt to validate information about campaign finances and contracting with interviewees from opposing political factions and independent sources.

Our interviews were conducted just months prior to Colombia's 2019 local elections, which allowed us to observe negotiations among political actors and contractors up close. As a traditional politician from Santa Marta remarked, 'If you don't watch over the process of campaign finance in real time, the candidate will construct it later as he pleases'.¹⁴ In-depth interviews close to the elections improved the accuracy of the information and ability to observe vote-buying efforts in real time.

5 The relationship between discretionary infrastructure contracts and vote-buying

Using our contracting data, we first show that a distinct contracting cycle exists in which politicians are more likely to assign infrastructure contracts directly in the month prior to Colombia's electoral prohibition. Table 1 shows the marginal effects estimates from logit models. We estimate the probability of a direct contract being issued in the month prior to the electoral prohibition compared to other months, with all other control variables held at their means. When including month and contract-type fixed effects (Model 3), we find that there is a 19-percentage point increase in the probability that an infrastructure project is awarded through direct contracting in the month prior to the Guarantee Laws.¹⁵ The models also show that national entities are 10 percentage points more likely to use direct contracting in the run-up to an election. During regional election years when the Guarantees Law applies, the probability of national contracts being awarded through direct contracting is 3 percentage points less than that for regional contracts. This is consistent with the idea that subnational politicians use direct contracting around elections that bear directly on their political careers.

¹³ Interview with local politician mayoral candidate, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta; interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with traditional politician, 8/6/2019, Santa Marta.

¹⁴ Interview with traditional politician, 8/6/2019, Santa Marta.

¹⁵ While not the focus of this paper, there are similar but smaller effects in national election years. There is a 1.4 percentage point increase in the probability of a direct contract in the month before presidential elections. Limiting the sample to only regional contracts produces very similar results.

Table 1: The probability of direct contracting prior to regional elections

Pr(Direct Contract)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Guarantees Law	0.171*** (0.003)	0.212*** (0.004)	0.189*** (0.004)
National Contract	0.118*** (0.002)	0.123*** (0.002)	0.106*** (0.002)
Guarantee Laws * National Contract	-0.0406*** (0.006)	-0.0445*** (0.005)	-0.0341*** (0.005)
Month FE		X	X
Service type FE			X
Observations	646,781	646,781	646,781

Note: standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. We are only look at the Guarantees Law during regional election years.

Source: authors' calculations based on SECOP (2011–19).

Second, Table 2 examines the quality of the contracts assigned in the month prior to the electoral prohibition. Model 1 shows the predicted marginal effects estimated from a zero-inflated negative binomial model to estimate the number of days added to a contract. Contracts signed through direct means in general have extensions of 1.5 additional days compared to competitive projects. Contracts signed just prior to the Guarantees Law are somewhat less likely to have days added to them. However, projects tendered as direct contracts just prior to the electoral prohibition have an estimated 6.5 additional days added to them. While a week extension to a contract may seem substantively minor, more than three-quarters of contracts have no extensions registered in the system.¹⁶

Model 2 looks at the probability of a contract running over budget using a simple linear probability model. We estimate the probability of a cost addition for direct contracts issued just before the electoral prohibition. These contracts are somewhat less likely to have additional costs. The only significant predictor is the contract size, where large contracts are more likely to lead to cost additions. The results thus provide mixed support for the idea that rushed electoral contracts are lower quality: while they are more likely to have project delays, they have no relationship with cost overruns. It is possible that the weak effects result from data quality problems: many projects do not report cost and time additions or inaccurately enter them as zeros, because it requires accessing the system again after the contract has been issued.

¹⁶ We find similar results in a zero-inflated Poisson model, and similarly relevant differences when we estimate a simpler logit model for whether the contract has any time addition at all.

Table 2: The relationship between electoral contracting and project quality

	(1) Pr(Time Addition)	(2) Pr(Cost Addition)
Direct Contract	1.490*** (0.0787)	-0.0157*** (0.000909)
Guarantees Law	-0.952*** (0.131)	-0.0129*** (0.00245)
Direct Contract * Guarantees Law	6.568*** (0.690)	-0.00313 (0.00358)
Contract Value	2.86e-07*** (1.14e-08)	5.77e-10*** (5.84e-11)
Observations	648,301	648,301

Note: standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: authors' calculations based on SECOP (2011-19).

Table 3 turns to the relationship between direct contracts and clientelism reports. Model 1 shows that there is a positive correlation between the proportion of direct contracts, the total volume of infrastructure contracts, and reported clientelistic incidents, while controlling for municipal characteristics. These results thus suggest that contracting manipulations and clientelistic activities go together, while offering no causal leverage.

Models 2 and 3 examine the effects of political competition. The direct contracting variable loses significance, but the value of infrastructure contracts continues to predict more clientelistic reports. Competition itself has no clear relationship with clientelism; the margin of victory is insignificant. Municipalities in which the incumbent's party runs again in the next election cycle do have higher levels of reported clientelism, suggesting the possible presence of electoral machines in these districts. Model 3 looks more specifically at the relationship between competition and direct contracting. It shows that municipalities in which the incumbent's party runs in the next cycle rely less on direct contracting. We therefore find little support for our fourth hypothesis that competitive districts have more vote-buying or a sharper contracting cycle. However, there are strong theoretical reasons why competition has cross-cutting effects: it may increase the incentives to engage in contractual manipulations, while reducing the ability of incumbents to get away with manipulations.

Table 3: The relationship between direct contracts and clientelism reports

	(1) Clientelism Reports	(2) Clientelism Reports	(3) Direct Contracts
Direct Contract	0.842*** (0.247)	-0.259 (0.227)	
Contract Value	5.23e-09*** (4.33e-10)	1.52e-09*** (5.39e-10)	-0.001 (0.000)
Margin		-0.310 (0.296)	-0.0124 (0.0309)
Incumbent		0.186* (0.110)	-0.0379*** (0.0121)
Budget	0.0369*** (0.002)	2.008*** (0.191)	0.149*** (0.0437)
Observations	3,098	3,086	3,068

Note: standard errors in parentheses, municipal controls not shown. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Source: authors' calculations based on SECOP (2011–19) and the Attorney General's electoral fraud reports (*Sistema Penal Oral Acusatorio de la Fiscalía*, SPOA).

Important limitations on these last models come from the quality of the clientelism data and identification challenge. Citizen reports of clientelistic behaviour are rare and dependent on trust in state authorities. Clientelism thus may be underreported, particularly in weak institutional environments that are also conducive to contractual manipulations. Furthermore, regression analyses only can suggest correlations: it is plausible that municipalities with clientelism have weaker institutions and more corrupt practices that correlate with contract manipulations, even though there is no direct connection between clientelism and contracting. Qualitative research thus is an important complement to the suggestive quantitative evidence.

6 Infrastructure contracts in a subnational political monopoly: Barranquilla

We now turn to our paired city comparisons to trace out the relationship between infrastructure contracts, vote-buying, and political competition. Since 2008 the Char family has established a subnational monopoly in Barranquilla. Political allies of the Char family have controlled city hall and the city council, with approval ratings above 75 per cent, since 2008. Since 2019, the Char also took control of the governorship of the surrounding department, Atlántico. Although the Char started from a position of private power as owners of one of Colombia's largest retail conglomerates, *Olimpica* supermarkets, public infrastructure contracts have allowed them to finance mass vote-buying and strengthen their hold on local power.

Prior to decentralization, local politics in Barranquilla looked quite different. A small handful of elite families—notably the Name family traditionally associated with the Liberal Party and the Gerlein family associated with the Conservative Party—alternated in control of the city's governing institutions. These families mobilized voters to participate in national elections using construction materials, land, and other in-kind inducements.¹⁷ Barranquilla's ruling families invested little in public goods, showing a classic tension between particularistic distribution and public goods provision. By the late 1980s, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure had produced

¹⁷ Interview with former Atlántico department bureaucrat, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with NGO director, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

a ‘humanitarian crisis’: the southern half of the city, where the poorest residents lived, largely lacked potable water, public sanitation, and electricity.¹⁸

The combination of political decentralization and underprovision of basic goods led to a transformation of city politics in which political outsiders and powerful infrastructure contractors emerged as important players. In 1992, a diverse coalition assembled to elect the first leftist mayor of a major Colombian city, Bernardo Hoyos Montoya. Hoyos, a Catholic priest who had spent years committed to social work in Barranquilla’s poorest neighbourhoods, ran on a platform to replace the city’s discredited elites and forge a new form of politics.¹⁹ In office, Hoyos broke with established parties that had supported his campaign and launched his own political movement, *Movimiento Ciudadano*. He initially followed through on his promises to extend public works and services to the city’s marginalized neighbourhoods.²⁰ But the movement remained ‘a hollow, top-down structure’ with little capacity to mobilize votes.²¹ To compensate, Hoyos and his allies pacted with their long-time rivals, the traditional Name clan, which still managed a network of clientelist brokers. Hoyos offered public contracts to the Name family in exchange for the support of their vote-buying network.²²

During Hoyos’s second term in office (1998–2001), he privatized many public services, resulting in lucrative one-time concession payments. He also built ties with a powerful family involved in both narcotrafficking and construction originally from Cali, the Daes. The Daes brothers determined the amount and recipients of all public contracts.²³ In return, the Daes financed Hoyos’s successors’ campaigns.²⁴ The pact with the Daes, according to several co-founders of the *Movimiento Ciudadano*, led to years of mismanagement, corruption, and ultimately bankruptcy for the city.²⁵ The movement’s vote share declined in each election after 1994 (Garcia and Godoy: 2009: 65). Hoyos eventually went to jail for the misuse of public resources.

Amid a generalized atmosphere of distrust, Alejandro Char won Barranquilla’s mayoral race in 2007. Char capitalized on the fact that his family had remained on the margins of local politics for decades, gaining much more significant political influence and experience at the national level. The family built a broad base of political support, ranging from disaffected *Movimiento Ciudadano* leaders to then-President Álvaro Uribe.²⁶ The Char family portrayed themselves as apolitical ‘efficient managers’ ready to take control of the city from a corrupt ‘political class’.²⁷

¹⁸ Interview with civil society leader, 7/4/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with former *Movimiento Ciudadano* leader, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla.

¹⁹ Interview with former local politician, 7/22/2019, Barranquilla. Social leaders from Barranquilla’s impoverished south supplied the ‘vote of opinion’, while local business leaders—including Fuad Char—who had long been relegated to the margins of elite city politics supplied the ‘electoral machinery’ necessary to win.

²⁰ Interview with journalist, 7/2/2019, Barranquilla.

²¹ Interview with civil society leader, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

²² Interview with journalist, 12/2/2020. Interview with former *Movimiento Ciudadano* leader, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with former *Movimiento Ciudadano* leader, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla.

²³ Interview with local businessman, 7/19/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with former *Movimiento Ciudadano* leader, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla.

²⁴ Interview with former *Movimiento Ciudadano* leader, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with local private sector leader, 7/19/2019, Barranquilla.

²⁵ Interview with Hermes Lara, 7/23/2019. Interview with Carlos Maldonado, 7/19/2019.

²⁶ Interview with regional politician, 7/22/2019, Barranquilla.

²⁷ Interview with journalist, 7/2/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

Char took office with a mandate for change and a bankrupt government. He began to solidify the family's control through a powerful network of infrastructure contractors. The Char built a 'totally closed circle of contractors' willing to fund their campaigns through a combination of carrots and sticks.²⁸ They exploited the return of national and foreign investment to Barranquilla after years of capital flight under *Movimiento Ciudadano* to attract powerful contractors and invest heavily in infrastructure. City residents refer to this period as the 'revolution of cement'. Under Char, the city channelled multimillion-dollar contracts to seven or eight favoured firms, including firms owned by the Daes and Gerlein families.²⁹ The contracts resulted in highly visible, critical projects including canals to control Barranquilla's catastrophic annual floods and new secondary schools, hospitals, and parks.³⁰ The scale and rapid execution of the projects made an impression even among the Char's critics.

The infrastructure drive delivered public goods to voters, but also funded the Char's vote-buying machine. Infrastructure contracts went to favoured firms and 'no one controlled the price'.³¹ The purpose was twofold: as local businesspeople explained, the small group of mega-contractors 'got their cut', but they also agreed to fund the Char's campaigns.³² As one economist from Barranquilla elaborated, 'otherwise, they wouldn't have gotten a cent'.³³ The Char reinvested the resources extracted from public contracts into vote-buying; observers estimate that the Char bought roughly 40 per cent of the votes they received in local elections.³⁴

The Char set up an unconventional distribution mechanism to buy votes in the absence of a party network: their supermarket chain. *Olimpica* supermarkets distributed free food during local elections. Cashiers and employees were expected to deliver certain quotas of family members' and friends' votes in exchange for cash payments.³⁵

Colombia bans consecutive re-election so Alejandro Char himself could not run for a second term. However, his handpicked successor and a close ally of the family, Elsa Noguera, easily won the 2011 elections with 58 per cent of the vote compared to her closest competitor's 29 per cent.³⁶ In 2019, the Char went on to win Barranquilla's mayoral elections for the fourth consecutive term and took control of Atlántico's governorship. The Char's vote-buying machine reliably delivers votes in such large quantities that the family has also become a key player in national legislative and presidential elections'.³⁷

Initially, the Char may have assigned contracts close to elections to gain the necessary funds. But the disappearance of local political competition coincided with the emergence of a 'smooth' contracting cycle in which contracts are assigned throughout the mayor's term on the expectation

²⁸ Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

²⁹ 'Los megacontratistas de la era Char en Barranquilla', *La Silla Vacía*, 31 Jan 2016.

³⁰ Interview with NGO leader, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

³¹ Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

³² Interview with local private sector leader, 7/19/2019, Barranquilla.

³³ Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

³⁴ Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with journalist, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla.

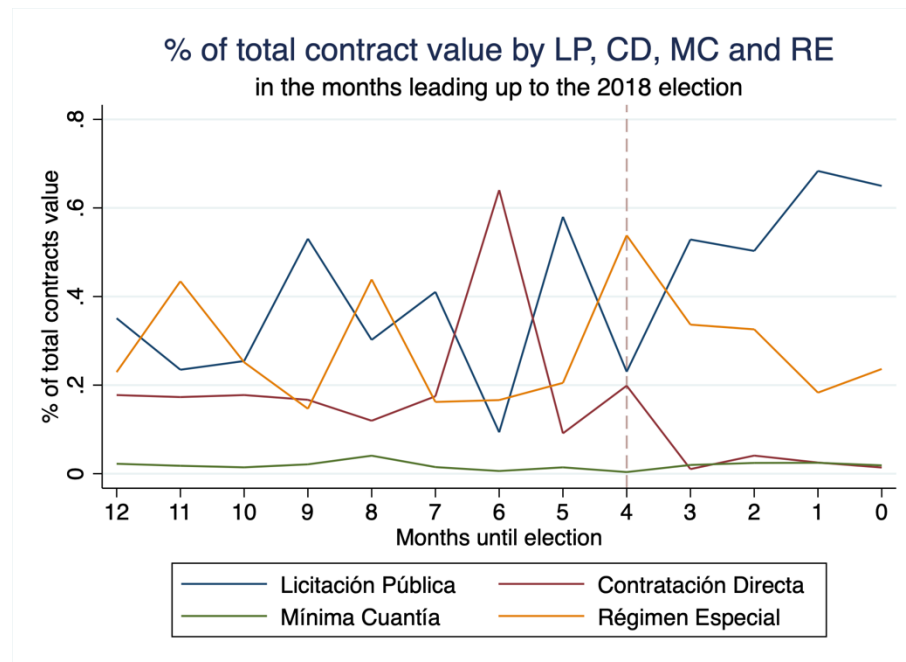
³⁵ Interview with neighbourhood leader, 7/20/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with NGO leader, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

³⁶ Colombia.com (n.d.)

³⁷ Interview with journalist, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. The Char's extensive family network also connects them to relatives of current and former heads of Colombia's accountability institutions, which several sources claimed helps shield them from scrutiny by prosecutors and auditors.

of later campaign contributions. As Figure 1 shows, there may be a spike in direct contracting in the six months prior to the 2018 election, but the data are quite noisy with a more limited rush right before the election than we will see in Santa Marta. Indeed, it may no longer be necessary to manipulate contracts just prior to elections because contractors are certain that the Char will win office and that they will benefit from their continued control. Data unfortunately are not available prior to 2011 to observe whether electoral cycles were clearer when Char first came to power.

Figure 1: The infrastructure contract cycle in Barranquilla, 2018



Source: authors' calculations from SECOP (2011–19).

In addition to the use of contracts to buy votes, the Char have manipulated contracts to gain elite political support and co-opt potential rivals. Since the family's first term (2008–11) in city hall, the Char have needed city councillors to greenlight large infrastructure projects and approve the use of future budgetary obligations (*vigencias futuras*)—essentially, an instrument to commit future governments' budgets to long-run projects. Future budget obligations have put the city in debt through 2054 and constrain the resources available to subsequent administrations. City councillors allegedly have received a share of the contract rents to back the Char's infrastructure plans.³⁸

The Char have also allocated contracts to align Barranquilla's traditional elite families behind them and crowd out potential rivals. Although the city's twentieth-century ruling families, the Name and Gerlein, at first criticized the Char's concentration of power, they fell silent after city hall began allocating contracts to their firms.³⁹ Similarly, Atlántico governor Eduardo Verano (2015–19) morphed from a critic into a supporter after partnering with the Char to launch several mega-projects in the city.⁴⁰ Civil society groups have also seen their powers to criticize the government curtailed by an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, and allegations of threats of economic

³⁸ Interview with former local politician, 7/22/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with transparency activist, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

³⁹ Interview with NGO director, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

⁴⁰ Interview with former Atlántico department bureaucrat, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with businessman, 7/19/2019, Barranquilla.

retaliation and illegal wiretapping against the Char's critics abound.⁴¹ Local politicians allege that Atlántico's leading Conservative senator, Efraín Cepeda, ordered them to abstain from running against Char's candidates in local races. As one adviser to a traditional political party lamented, 'we invited them [the Char] into our house and they became the owners'.⁴²

The consequences of contract clientelism—and the Char's decade-and-a-half in office more broadly—are normatively ambiguous. On the one hand, even critics acknowledge that the Char have invested in much-needed local public goods. Neighbourhoods that were neglected for decades received schools, hospitals, and sewer systems, underscoring the potentially positive relationship between contract clientelism and public goods provision. These investments earned the Char genuine electoral support in some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods. Residents of these neighbourhoods regularly talk about the Char family as representing a 'new type of politician', who cares about ordinary people and delivers major projects, rather than simply stealing.⁴³

On the other hand, the Char family found a new way to tap into state resources to limit political competition and societal accountability. The use of public contracting to maintain political power tips the playing field severely against political competitors who, lacking connections to contractors, struggle to finance their campaigns and are perceived by Barranquilla residents as less likely to provide public goods than the Char. One individual with a long political career on the coast summarized the ambiguous results of the Char rule: 'They finally built a state in Barranquilla, and they have completely captured it for themselves'.⁴⁴

7 Infrastructure contracts in competitive subnational politics: Santa Marta

Santa Marta, the large city closest to Barranquilla, has also experienced the rise of contract clientelism since decentralization. However, local politics in Santa Marta have become much more competitive over time and allow us to examine how the role of infrastructure contractors in local politics varies in a city with highly competitive elections.

Much like Barranquilla, Santa Marta was governed by elite landholding families tied to traditional political parties for much of the twentieth century. But unlike in Barranquilla, the city's traditional families, the Vives, Diazgranados, and Cotes, did not face robust competition from local leftists or alternative movements. They became 'experts in vote-buying' by linking to organizational brokers in the city's pre-existing communal action councils (*juntas de acción comunal*).⁴⁵ They gained resources by awarding concessions to manage much of the city's public services, including water and tax collection, to private contractors. Mayors and their family clans treated these firms as 'personal banks' for embezzlement and campaign finance, much like Hoyos in Barranquilla.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Interview with local private sector leader, 7/19/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with academic, 7/17/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with former local politician, 7/22/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with department bureaucrat, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla. Interview with former Atlántico department bureaucrat, 7/24/2019, Barranquilla.

⁴² Interview with department bureaucrat, 7/23/2019, Barranquilla.

⁴³ Interview with expert from the *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE), 7/11/2019, Bogotá. Interview with NGO director, 7/15/2019, Barranquilla.

⁴⁴ Interview with former local politician, 7/22/2019, Barranquilla.

⁴⁵ Interview with academic, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta.

⁴⁶ Interview with former interim mayor of Santa Marta, 8/1/2019, Santa Marta.

Paramilitary violence also reshaped politics in Santa Marta. To protect their narco-trafficking and agribusinesses, the city's elite families developed ties to paramilitary groups. In the short run, paramilitaries crushed local political opposition, assassinating dozens of students, leftist party activists, and social leaders.⁴⁷ Yet, after the demobilization of the paramilitaries in 2006, the memory of repression and outrage at corruption united opposition to the city's traditional elite around the former dean of the public university of the department of Magdalena, Carlos Caicedo. Colombia's judiciary also launched investigations into paramilitary-linked politicians that put four of Santa Marta's five elected mayors and several other local elites behind bars.⁴⁸

The legal process against paramilitary-linked politicians created a political opening in the city, but also the need for new ways to finance political campaigns. Caicedo ran on the message that local elites had 'bankrupted, looted, and privatized the city'. Yet he also courted the support of several established economic groups, including one of the city's largest infrastructure firms, the Daabon Group. Caicedo himself stressed that a degree of elite backing, including from the Liberal Party during his 2011 run, was necessary to avoid being disqualified from the race by the politicized local office of the National Registry (*Registraduría*).⁴⁹ Interviewees also underscored that the Daabon Group contributed more to Caicedo's campaign than publicly reported and were promised contracts to renovate the city's port in return.⁵⁰

When Caicedo ran for office for the first time, his promises to donors were not credible. It is possible that Caicedo's sponsors believed that, once in office, they would receive public contracts and control him. But Caicedo broke with both the Liberal Party and the Daabon Group after taking office. Caicedo reneged on his contractual promises and instead invested in building his political movement, *Fuerza Ciudadana*. Although Caicedo and his allies went on to win three consecutive elections in Santa Marta, they faced intense resistance. The Cotes family, still in charge of the governorship and city council, generated a high degree of local competition.

Patterns of public contracting differed markedly from those described in Barranquilla. First, Santa Marta's more competitive local politics resulted in relatively unstable relationships between politicians and contractors. From a company's view, there was great uncertainty about the winning candidate given such competitive races. Companies tended to contribute to a range of candidates. As a former leader of *Fuerza Ciudadana* who had since left the movement observed: 'What happens is that during campaign season, these firms somehow support everyone... They want to see themselves represented in a city hall that favours their interests and economic growth'. A member of our focus group similarly noted that contractors in Santa Marta 'avoid getting directly involved in politics. Instead, they manage political forces under the table'.⁵¹ For instance, in the 2019 local elections, the Daabon Group helped finance the campaigns of both a traditional politician challenging *Fuerza Ciudadana*'s control of city hall as well as a centre-left, former *Fuerza* challenger to the movement.⁵²

⁴⁷ 'People atomized themselves and tried to become invisible to protect themselves', explained one former student leader and *Fuerza Ciudadana* activist. Interview with *Fuerza Ciudadana* activist, 8/3/2019, Santa Marta.

⁴⁸ Interview with traditional politician, 8/6/2019, Santa Marta.

⁴⁹ Interview with Carlos Caicedo, 8/10/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵⁰ Interview with academics, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former bureaucrat, 8/5/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵¹ Focus group, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵² Interview with municipal secretary, 8/8/2019.

Caicedo initially eschewed contract clientelism, but he then built political linkages with local and outside contractors. In 2015, Caicedo regained the support of the Daabon Group and several other local firms for ‘strategic reasons’, according to the research director of Santa Marta’s Chamber of Commerce.⁵³ Caicedo and his successor, Rafael Martínez, also ‘imported’ contractors from other Colombian cities to build large infrastructure projects and fund their campaigns. An ex-official in Caicedo’s administration explained:

Here, generally, contracting is done with local economic groups. But *Fuerza Ciudadana* imported contractors who they brought from other places, and who have done most of the construction, for instance for the mega-libraries and the health centres... It was easier for them to negotiate with contractors that no one here in the city knew. Before, people knew what the deals were because they were contractors from here. But if you bring people from elsewhere, you can make the information ‘behave’ for you, information about how much you receive for awarding a contract, that is.⁵⁴

Following our theoretical expectations about timing of contracts, almost all the major infrastructure contracts awarded during Caicedo’s term in office (2012–15) were signed in his final year in office as Rafael Martínez, Caicedo’s favoured successor, launched his campaign. These patterns can be seen in the contracting data shown in Figure 2, where a sharp peak in direct contracting occurs just prior to the election. Some loyal to the movement attribute the timing to simple credit claiming. The government launched a wave of projects, known locally as *Obras Para el Cambio*, as an electoral strategy to publicize public works. The movement held brick-laying ceremonies just months before the election and rallied supporters around a message that without *Fuerza Ciudadana* in city hall, ‘change would stop’.⁵⁵ Other interviewees, including former members of the movement and private sector leaders, argued the timing was driven by the need for campaign funds. ‘Almost all the contracts came with a per cent (for the mayor)’,⁵⁶ one individual commented on the 2015 period. Others separately confirmed that lucrative contracts to build new health centres across the city were awarded in exchange for campaign funds.⁵⁷ These contracts were done through direct contracting, which allowed Caicedo to control their assignment. As one interviewee noted, ‘direct contracting became the rule rather than the exception’.⁵⁸

⁵³ Interview with local private sector leader, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵⁴ Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta. These relationships were corroborated by several other sources: Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 8/4/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta. A local private sector leader similarly told us, ‘They worked with outsiders to be able to manage things, and so they wouldn’t generate rumours locally.’ Interview with local private sector leader, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

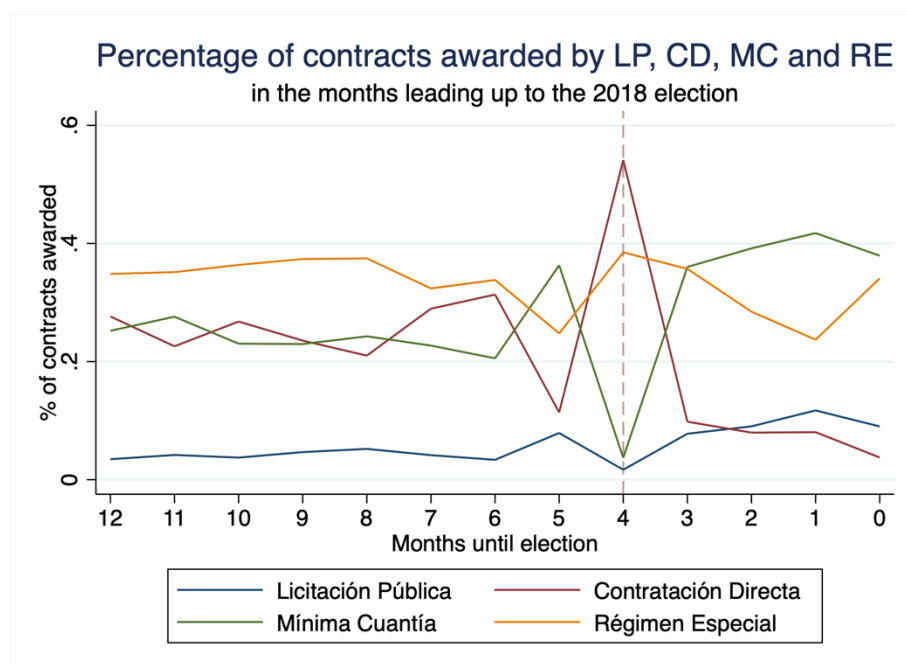
⁵⁵ Interview with *Fuerza Ciudadana* activist, 8/3/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with Carlos Caicedo, 8/10/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵⁶ Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 8/4/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵⁷ Interview with academics, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 8/4/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁵⁸ Interview with Felipe Vives, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

Figure 2: The infrastructure contract cycle in Santa Marta, 2018



Source: authors' calculations from SECOP (2011–19).

The quality of the contracts suffered because of the electoral rush. One interviewee linked the elevated costs, unfinished works, and the re-election campaign: ‘All the works they were building cost double, or they haven’t finished... there are huge amounts of money managed here by the campaign, precisely because they [*Fuerza Ciudadana*] work very closely with contractors’.⁵⁹

Although contracts are a primary source of campaign funds, Santa Marta differs from Barranquilla in the use of these funds. Even *Fuerza Ciudadana*’s harshest critics, as well as critical voices from inside the movement, acknowledge that its leaders have avoided vote-buying and prioritized maintaining the movement’s progressive brand.⁶⁰ The fungible cash from contracts largely has been used to co-opt local elites,⁶¹ publicize the movement’s accomplishments locally through elaborate events, and pay for the legal defence for its leaders.⁶² As one interviewee explained, ‘Campaigns are expensive. Feeding people, bringing them places, convincing them—that adds up. Having leaders in the streets costs a lot. Regardless of how much they support you, no one will work five or six months in the street without pay’. All these activities meant ‘rounding up public money, from contractors’.⁶³

The outcomes of *Fuerza Ciudadana*’s contract clientelism for Santa Marta have been both positive and negative. On the one hand, as in Barranquilla, Caicedo and his allies have delivered public goods to communities which for decades the local state was unwilling or unable to provide,

⁵⁹ Interview with former bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶⁰ Interview with former department bureaucrat, 8/1/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 8/7/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶¹ Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 8/4/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with traditional politician, 8/6/2019, Santa Marta. Interview with bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶² Interview with ex-municipal official, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶³ Interview with ex-municipal official, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

targeting provision to those most in need. A group of community leaders in a poor peripheral neighbourhood of Santa Marta told us that before *Fuerza Ciudadana*'s administration brought paved roads, parks, and reliable electricity to their neighbourhoods, they felt politically invisible. The movement also promoted citizen involvement beyond clientelistic ties, fostering new grassroots leadership. 'Before Caicedo, we didn't understand that we could be leaders, too', one local activist explained.⁶⁴ *Fuerza Ciudadana*'s triumph also broke the decades-long rule of some of Colombia's most violent and corrupt local family dynasties. Unlike the Char, interviews produced little evidence that *Fuerza Ciudadana* leaders use connections with contractors to personally enrich themselves.

However, the movement's need for contracts has also steered its leaders' choices about public goods provision away from the cities' most pressing unmet needs. Santa Marta built suspended walkways, but the neighbourhoods below—like much of the city—still lack access to drinkable water. Investment in projects such as parks and libraries has never been higher yet spending on public services like health and schooling has inched upwards more slowly.⁶⁵ Matching our predictions, contract clientelism has led to a growing number of stalled or incomplete projects with elevated costs, particularly among the contracts assigned just prior to the election. 'Martínez dedicated himself to finishing small projects', one member of city government commented, 'but they're nothing compared to the scale of the projects he hasn't finished'.⁶⁶ Likewise, private sector leaders puzzled over how Santa Marta's unfinished central library, having already consumed the entire initial outlay specified in its contract, could cost more than a 22-story apartment complex built in recent years.⁶⁷ One jaded former city official let us know the full extent of his disappointment: 'The people get distracted, get duped, by seeing cement and bricks. But that's not real development'.⁶⁸ For many, the manipulation of public contracts has created a wide gap between *Fuerza Ciudadana*'s progressive, anti-corruption rhetoric and its actual practices. As the movement's national profile has risen, hopes that it could finally advance clean government in Santa Marta have fallen.

8 Conclusions

This paper fills a gap in work on clientelism by analysing the source of funds to mobilize voters and buy votes. We argued that politicians manipulate public contracts to gain access to the cash needed to engage in clientelistic linkage strategies, or what we dubbed 'contract clientelism'. Original quantitative and qualitative evidence revealed electoral contracting cycles in which outgoing politicians assigned infrastructure contracts through direct procedures. While it is difficult to connect contract manipulation to clientelism, we showed that districts that manipulated contracts also had higher levels of reported vote-buying, all else equal. Interviews reinforced that infrastructure contractors have provided the cash to fund a powerful vote-buying machine in Barranquilla and a variety of campaign activities in Santa Marta.

⁶⁴ Interview with neighbourhood leaders, 8/9/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶⁵ Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶⁶ Interview with bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta. As a local reporter confirmed in July 2019, 'many works haven't been finished, and if they have been, it's beneath the shadow of scandal'. Interview with journalist, 7/3/2019, Bogotá.

⁶⁷ Interview with bureaucrat, 8/8/2019, Santa Marta.

⁶⁸ Interview with former *Fuerza Ciudadana* leader, 7/30/2019, Santa Marta.

We do not make a causal claim that the manipulation of infrastructure contracts causes vote-buying or vice versa. Instead, the paper suggests an unexpected synergy between infrastructure investment and clientelism. Most work on clientelism posits a trade-off between clientelism, which delivers private benefits to voters, and infrastructure, which delivers public goods. Instead, we suggest that there are financial reasons for politicians to provide *both* local public goods and clientelistic handouts. Politicians increasingly need to tap into lucrative infrastructure contracts to finance their campaigns. We saw this powerful combined strategy in Barranquilla. The Char family has secured political power both by delivering local public goods and using the associated contracts to fund its vote-buying operations.

The implications of clientelism for public goods provision, state capacity, and democracy remain mixed. Politicians may provide high levels of public goods when they are trying to buy votes. However, they may do so in ways that raise the costs of infrastructure projects and result in a worse selection of projects and reduced transparency. Our quantitative analysis provided some evidence that rushed contracts had longer delays, though no additional costs. Qualitatively, interviewees in Santa Marta lamented the proliferation of unfinished and costly projects launched on the campaign trail. Politicians have less reason to promote socially useful projects or finish them if their main goal is to access campaign funds.

This study also shows that state reforms that have restricted the discretionary distribution of state resources may be insufficient to end clientelism. Hagopian et al. (2008) argue that economic reforms made it harder to use state resources and patronage hiring for clientelistic ends and encouraged a turn to programmatic political competition in Brazil. Neoliberal state reforms similarly limited the PRI's ability to use the state to buy votes in Mexico (Greene 2007). Rule-bound social policies similarly are thought to undermine vote-buying machines (De La O 2015; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016). But, even as access to state resources and social policy programmes have declined, many politicians have found new ways to fund clientelism through the public contracting system. The key contemporary question may be whether reforms to reduce discretion in public contracting or public campaign funding can finally stem clientelism.

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