



Political parties, state resources and electoral clientelism

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Abstract

Contemporary political parties often use state resources to win elections. In this context, electoral clientelism evolved from the straightforward vote buying to sophisticated exchanges in which the relationship between patrons (parties or candidates) and clients (voters) is sometimes difficult to grasp. We address the question how do the distributive politics and electoral clientelism interact, how these forms of interactions differ across various context, and what implications they bring for the functioning of political systems. The special issue provides theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions to the burgeoning literature about the multi-faceted feature of electoral clientelism. It unfolds the complex relationship between distributive politics and clientelism, and conceptualizes electoral clientelism as a dynamic process that occurs through different sequences. It enriches the methodological tools aimed at investigating electoral clientelism. Finally, the special issue approaches clientelism from several perspectives and brings together substantive empirical evidence about the varieties of clientelism around the world.

Keywords Electoral clientelism · Political parties · Redistribution · State resources

Introduction

The power acquired by the rulers is, in theory, tied to an expectation of accountability and responsiveness towards all citizens equally regardless of their political preferences. In reality, democratic accountability is sometimes replaced or complemented with a form of distributive politics in which political actors use the privileged access

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to state resources to get re-elected or to consolidating a medium-term relationship with the electorate (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Dahlberg and Johansson 2002; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Gherghina 2013; Stokes et al. 2013). This form of distributive politics is called electoral clientelism and includes three types of actors: patrons (parties or candidates) providing benefits, brokers facilitating the exchange as intermediaries, and the clients (voters) returning support for provided goods (Mares and Young 2016). It evolved from the straightforward vote buying where citizens exchange their votes in return for direct payment or preferential access to goods and services to more sophisticated exchanges in which the relationships between patrons and clients is sometimes difficult to grasp. Moreover, the vertical nexus with the voters (Kitschelt 2000; Stokes 2005; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes et al. 2013) was complemented by horizontal ties with private donors who make contributions in exchange for public procurement and influence on policy development (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017; Das and Maiorano 2019).

However, despite relatively complex theoretical models, the demands to collect relevant data suitable for a comparative study are often too high. Most research in this field remains limited to a single or very few countries. As a result, scholars often guess how the findings from one system could travel and materialize to another context. That is where we aim to contribute. This special issue tackles the variety of electoral clientelism around the world from three perspectives; (1) what are the forms of interactions between the electoral clientelism and distributive politics; (2) to what degree do these forms of interaction differ across various political and social contexts; (3) do these patterns bear specific implications for the political systems in which they occur?

In their attempt to address one of these questions, the contributions to this special issue provide novel additions to the theory, methodology, and empirical evidence helping to better understand the topic of electoral clientelism in a more comparative perspective. Most importantly, the special issue breaks down the complex relationship between distributive politics and electoral clientelism into different sequences, and hence provides relevant underlying processes operating deeper inside this complex phenomenon. The findings are accompanied by innovations in the research methodology and originally gathered empirical evidence. This aims to further support the future research to keep deepening our understanding of how political parties utilize public resources to improve their own standings in the democratic competition.

Emergence of electoral clientelism and some of its forms

Electoral clientelism occurred gradually as a response to the transformation of party organizations. The shrinking of mass organizations limited the traditional type of resources previously flowing from party members (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; van Biezen et al. 2012). Political parties faced an increasing pressure to secure finances for survival and sustainability and they adapted. As an immediate response, parties professionalized and sought to replace the missing resources with direct funding by private interests. This politically motivated model of party funding from private



capital was quickly perceived as a cause of clientelism and corruption. Hence, it was deemed unsuitable for a democratic governance serving equally the whole citizenship. Political parties got closer to the state, instead of private entities, and established mechanisms through which the resources provided by the state replaced the contributions from other politically motivated donors (Panebianco 1988; Katz and Mair 1995, 2009). This close connection with the state was used primarily to boost parties' performance in electoral arena, but was soon institutionalized in the form of the funding provided directly to the political parties by state to support their functioning as professional organizations, recruiting political representatives and facilitating the link between the state and its citizens (van Biezen and Kopecký 2007, 2014).

It is important to distinguish that the tighter connection between the parties and the state enabled parties to utilize two kinds of public resources. First, the state subsidies provided to active political parties to cover their operations as political organizations. This funding intends to provide political parties that end up in the opposition the means to survive throughout electoral cycle(s) so that the electoral competition is pluralist. Second, public funds are available considerably more to the governing parties which, thanks to their access to the office, can direct it to specific areas or publics. Earlier studies show that politicians in office often take advantage of state resources in various forms.

One of the more apparent forms of electoral clientelism that can be clearly tracked with data is pork barrel. The existing literature shows that politicians intentionally bias money distribution to achieve favourable electoral outcomes (Denemark 2000; Costa-I-Font et al. 2003). The goal is to improve the local infrastructure and (often criticized) public services so that citizens can experience the positive change and become increasingly willing to support the incumbents and their political machines (Birch 1997; Hasen 2000; Stokes 2005; Stokes et al. 2013). They either target safe seats where the party member can win with a clear margin, or they focus on channelling resources to swing constituencies to avert the risk of losing (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Dahlberg and Johansson 2002). This targeting strategy is not entirely straightforward—especially in divided societies, electoral clientelism and ethno-politics appear intertwined. In such contexts, politicians tend to target their own ethnic groups (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Chandra 2007) and aim to mobilize their members (Nemčok et al. 2020). As such, even a seemingly simple relationship between patrons and clients, i.e., vote buying, gets more complex in ethnically divided societies.

Another form of electoral clientelism emerges on the horizontal nexus between parties and private donors. The central element is the office-seeking motivation of political actors who offer enhanced access to public procurements and policy-making in exchange for campaign contributions (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017). Various institutional factors (Hoare 1992; Khemani 2003) and background conditions (Stratmann 1995; Ansolabehere et al. 2004) may foster or halt the emergence of this type of exchange in a political system.

In general, the literature identifies several strategies employed by political actors to use clientelism. Even though some generalizations are possible, the particular strategies often depend on political and social conditions typical for the studied



cases. Moreover, the actions of patrons may further reflect their motivations which might seek short-term goals (e.g., improved electoral results), but also establishing of a long-lasting relationship with the electorate (Gherghina, 2013).

Studying electoral clientelism

Several bodies of the literature mapped different types of clientelist behavior and referred to consequences of clientelism; for detailed reviews, see (Mares and Young 2019; Pellicer et al. 2021). The idea of clientelistic politics includes a strong normative component according to which any form of clientelistic exchange deviates from the ideal functioning of democratic regimes. Many analytical efforts focus on the deviations between ideal and real functioning of distributive politics (Hoare 1992; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes 2009; Stokes et al. 2013). This led scholars to search for deviations, to map the forms taken by clientelism across political systems, and to analyze the social, political, and historical roots of clientelism. The latter are well reflected in a series of recent studies on democratizing countries (Aspinall and Hicken 2020; Denissen 2020; Driscoll 2020; Veenendaal and Corbett 2020; Weiss 2020; Yıldırım 2020).

The first studies on clientelism were conducted several decades ago and were case studies using mostly ethnographic techniques (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Their findings could hardly translate into conceptual frameworks with broader applicability to other countries and contexts. Less inductive reasoning started to dominate the field during 2000s and it allowed to emerge a generally defined concept of clientelism in the context of mass politics which understands the relationship between patrons and clients as an exchange (Stokes 2009; Berenschot and Aspinall 2020). These paid extensive attention to the forms of clientelism and the linkages among its main actors: patrons, brokers and clients. Since then, the study of clientelism has gradually expanded and many recent analyses explore the consequences of clientelism. They often go in two directions: some studies investigate individuals to understand how clientelistic practices shape attitudes and behaviors, while other works focus on institutions and societies (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes et al. 2013; Braidwood 2015; Bøggild 2016; Bøggild and Laustsen 2016; Corstange 2018; Nichter 2018; Nemčok et al. 2020; Tóth et al. 2020; Gherghina et al. 2021).

Due mainly to its informal dimension, clientelism is one of those research topics in which appropriate data for investigation is often scarce and challenging. While data about formal institutional settings are easier to reach, most models of clientelism (Stokes 2005; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Bratton 2008; Nichter 2008; Stokes et al. 2013; Gherghina and Volintiru 2017) are built mostly around institutional setup and tested with limited empirical evidence. Many comparative efforts quickly run into shortage of available empirical evidence and have a limited discussion about the variety of clientelistic strategies available worldwide. Some ways to overcome these challenges is through proxy data collected via expert surveys (Gherghina and Volintiru 2020; Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020; Berens and Ruth-Lovell 2021) or coordinated effort of many smaller case-oriented teams (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020).



Contributions and content of this special issue

The special issue contributes to this burgeoning literature about the multi-faceted feature of electoral clientelism in three ways. First, at a theoretical level, this special issue starts with an article that investigates the complex relationship between distributive politics and clientelism, and emphasizes the thin line that separates them (Denmark 2020). Three other articles conceptualize electoral clientelism as a dynamic process that may take various forms in addition to the classic exchange of goods between patron and client covered by previous research. The conceptual differences are observable in various political settings: a case of administrative clientelism that may hinder policy reforms in Canada (Howlett and Rayner 2020), the relation of electoral clientelism with specific types of deprivation in Latin America (Berens and Ruth-Lovell 2021), or the centralization of electoral clientelism through personal networks in an African country (Mişcoiu and Kakdeu 2021).

Second, the special issue enriches the methodological tools aimed at investigating clientelism. For example, the literature lacks indicators for the distribution of public resources by political parties when interacting with voters. This is partially addressed by several articles in this special issue in which clientelism can take the form of networks developed around one person (Mişcoiu and Kakdeu 2021), administrative personnel (Howlett and Rayner 2020), or electoral strategies (Saikkonen 2021). Related to consequences of clientelism, some works in this special issue suggest several methodological approaches that allow gauging the basic characteristics of expected clientelism. For example, one article using expert survey in combination with public opinion data indicates that the presence of clientelism increases the electoral support for parties with residualistic social policy platforms in the form of welfare state and redistribution (Berens and Ruth-Lovell 2021).

Third, this special issue approaches clientelism from several perspectives and brings together substantive empirical evidence about the varieties of clientelism. The evidence included in this special issue comes from expert perceptions (Gherghina and Volintiru 2020; Berens and Ruth-Lovell 2021), political elite behavior (Denmark 2020; Howlett and Rayner 2020), users of clientelism (Mişcoiu and Kakdeu 2021), and election campaign data (Saikkonen 2021). The special issue combines contributions in the form of contextualized case studies (Australia, Canada, Cameroon, and Russia) with comparative perspectives across countries (Latin America, Eastern partnership countries). The articles in this special issue cover the occurrence of electoral clientelism at both local and national level. Their analyses about causes and consequences provide generalizable conclusions, which reflect the complex reality and enrich the empirical evidence for further studies. Although some cases have strong particularities, their findings point at broader phenomena in the region. For example, the study of Cameroon evolves around the specific types of formal and informal appointees of the country president (Mişcoiu and Kakdeu 2021) but the general clientelistic mechanism is applicable to other countries where the appointment system is linked to elected public office.

The special issue starts with a theoretical discussion about clientelism and distributive politics. Denmark's article refers to the basic features of clientelism as



rooted on contingent exchanges of benefits that require monitoring and enforcement for their efficacy. These requirements determine a greater reliance on pork barrel politics and the distribution of state resources to influence voters. His work analyzes distributive politics in Australia's party-based parliamentary system to compare the advantages and disadvantages of partisan pork barrel as an alternative to clientelism's contingency-based distributive logic. In Australia, the ruling party has discretion over the distribution of public funds, but its actions remain susceptible to scandal from charges of bias and malfeasance. The clientelist and pork barrel models are compared in the context of the 1993 Labor sports Grants the 2004 Liberal-National Regional Partnerships Program grants.

The second article looks at a specific type of distributive politics and illustrates how clientelism can prevent policy reforms. Howlett and Rayner use a case study of large-scale policy reform efforts in Integrated Land Management in Western Canada to show how clientelism can block efforts to enhance policy integration. So far, scholarship has focused extensively on the idea of replacing patchworks of public policies in specific issue areas with more coordinated or 'integrated' policy strategies. This article brings evidence about how the existence and resilience of pre-existing policy elements can lead to reform failures or sub-optimal outcomes.

The next two articles zoom in the sources of clientelism and distinguish between centralized control of clientelism and local level development. In their article, Miscoiu and Kakdeu explore the topic of clientelism in Cameroon as a species of a wider phenomenon affecting Central and Western Francophone Africa. They outline the centralization of clientelism formed around the 'Creatures', who are the country president's formal or informal appointees. They play the role of nodal elements that link the clientelistic chain to the central command. This happened at the expense of the locally dispersed and more autonomous clientelistic groups that were either included in or smashed by the pyramidal Creatures' structures. Their findings indicate the existence of strong agents at central level who articulate clientelistic relationships and mobilize structures. Saikkonen analyzes clientelism from the opposite angle and seeks to understand the importance of the regional and local level in coordinating the machine politics that delivers it. Her article suggests that control over the local administration is an important variable that shapes the effectiveness of authoritarian machine politics in Russia. The results highlight the importance of subnational political hierarchies and the local political setting in coordinating electoral manipulation. In the specific political context of this single-case study, the regional political machines were mostly non-partisan.

The final two contributions complement Saikkonen's approach with comparative analysis aiming to how political parties and electoral clientelism. The article written by Gherghina and Volintiru builds on earlier findings according to which political parties are key promoters and users of clientelism in many political settings. They investigate the extent to which some party-related features are more conducive to clientelism than others. Their analysis uses an original expert survey conducted for 15 parties in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2018. The results indicate that parties' territorial coverage, notoriety of the leader and private funding are important sources for clientelism, with important variations between the investigated countries.



In their article, Berens and Ruth-Lovell analyze the extent to which clientelism hollows out support for welfare progressivity in Latin America. They study how far clientelism stabilizes residualistic social policies by distorting patterns of representation and by substantiating a renunciation of state administered programs among the better-off. Their key argument is that clientelism can distort the link between the vested interest of low-income earners and redistributive policies so that the poor support parties with a residualistic social policy agenda. Consequently, clientelistic parties gain greater leverage to pursue liberal social policies by paying off the poor in return for their vote. The analysis combines information on party strategies from an expert survey with public opinion data for Latin America. It shows that clientelistic practices have an impact on the electoral support for political parties which promote a liberal welfare state.

These contributions to the special issue illustrate that political actors make use of electoral clientelism to maintain or gain access to positions of power. The various forms of electoral clientelism are not traceable only in democracies, but they apply to a much wider variety of political regimes. Even though the theories of democracy normatively reject the idea of clientelism as a flaw of representative government, future research must acknowledge that clientelistic practices are internal to the functioning of political systems. It is no longer sufficient to formulate prior research expectations in a way that the findings would solely confirm or reject the presence of electoral clientelism. Instead, empirical research could take a step forward and address more practically oriented topics proposing institutional designs and effective policies with a potential to diminish the practices of electoral clientelism. The contributions to this special issue outline several forms of clientelism that were not explored by previous studies. Further research could build on these and seek to elaborate definitions of clientelism that include these forms or develop a typology that can reunite them together with other forms. The articles included in this special issue provide an encompassing map of electoral clientelism, an analysis of potential causes and consequences, and thus provide a useful foundation for the next step suggested above.

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