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DEMOCRACY AND CLIENTELISM

How Uneasy a Relationship?

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Clientelism, Social Policy, and the Quality of Democracy. Edited by Diego Abente Brun and Larry Diamond. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 267. \$34.95 paper. \$69.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781421412290.

Clientelism in Everyday Latin American Politics. Edited by Tina Hilgers. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xi + 258. \$95.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137275981.

Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics. By Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xxi + 316. \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107660397.

Mobilizing Poor Voters: Machine Politics, Clientelism, and Social Networks in Argentina. By Mariela Szwarcberg. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 175. \$32.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107534629.

Is clientelism in the political realm antithetical to the development of democratic institutions and participation? If clientelism undermines efforts to promote democratic processes of governance, then expectations for the emergence of more equitable and rule-based polities must be amended. This concern lies at the heart of a burgeoning literature on democracy and its future in developing countries. Latin America is often privileged in this literature because of the persistence of political clientelism in its “third wave” democracies. Researchers and democracy advocates have noted that long after transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America and elsewhere, clientelism seems to be flourishing, even though the political arena is now generally characterized by the formal rules of democracy. Does this mean that the quality of democracy in such settings is inevitably compromised and likely to remain so?

In a previous generation of studies, scholars in the 1960s and 1970s explored the durable political relevance of patron-client relationships and clientelist networks, until then usually considered characteristics of traditional societies that had not yet developed universalistic norms for social, political, and economic interactions. Far from disappearing, however, such relationships were found to be important in many countries as underlying structures that helped explain voting patterns, political violence, the actions of political parties and machines, the intricacies of policy making and implementation, and the nature of state-society relationships in many more modern circumstances. This literature emphasized

the capacity of clientelism to adapt to new contexts and its impact on relationships of power at various levels of political interactions.

A more recent set of studies underscores the findings of this earlier work—that clientelistic relationships are strikingly persistent and widespread, that they are important in explaining structures of political power, and that they have consequences for the “who gets what” of resources controlled by the state and by political parties. But these new studies also open up additional avenues for research and understanding about how, why, and where clientelism works and what impact it has on the distribution of public benefits.

Renewed interest in political clientelism is concerned in particular with the relationship between its distributional effects and its persistence. In Latin America’s new democracies, this relationship is particularly engaging in the aftermath of neoliberal policy regimes that significantly reduced the goods and services made available through the state, or sought to target them in objective ways, or decentralized them to local and regional governments, where they were expected to be less available for political use. Yet inequitable patterns of distribution have characterized even these kinds of policies, and, some have argued, have become even more widespread and durable.

Important issues are at stake in this contemporary work on the topic. One is the extent to which political clientelism—enduring patterns of particularistic exchanges of concrete goods and services for political support—undermine or otherwise impair democratic institutions and participation, particularly the way in which elections are supposed to signal policy preferences to political elites and ensure that they are held accountable for the decisions they make. Clientelism is rooted in particularism and relationships of exchange; democracy is based on notions of equality and citizenship rights. For many, the impact of clientelism is to deflect and undermine interest-based and programmatic politics, often dividing societies into competing networks for votes and access to state-provided goods and services, creating widespread distortions in their distribution. For others, clientelism is an adaptation to the “real world” ways in which democracy is practiced when poverty is widespread and resources are scarce. Also at issue is whether and when this pattern of political exchange is likely to become less ubiquitous in Latin America and elsewhere. Some see clientelist politics as a hindrance to the development of democratic institutions; others see them as a way station along the path toward more equitable and democratic institutions.

Four recent books address such questions and evidence from Latin American countries. Two of these approach clientelism from an institutional and historical perspective, focusing considerable attention on political parties and their structures and on the contexts in which citizens and political elites interact. Two other books take a more formal approach and place the decision making of individual voters and political operatives at the center of analysis. Social policy, in particular health and conditional cash transfer programs, is of considerable concern in this research, as it is central to distributive politics in many new democracies and to how the poor fare in gaining access to goods and services provided either by political parties or by the state.

Two volumes explore the persistence and impact of clientelism in Latin American political parties in terms of the contextual factors that encourage it. Thus, they emphasize the tangible and immediate needs of those who live in poverty and the scarcity of resources for responding to such needs. In these contexts, people find a way to solve the problems of everyday life—how to gain access to a health clinic, find a way to repair a roof, get a job, get school supplies for children—by responding to politicians or brokers who offer such resources in exchange for their political support. Parties find this a useful way to mobilize voters.

In *Clientelism in Everyday Latin American Politics*, editor Tina Hilgers establishes a clear definition of political clientelism, emphasizing ongoing exchanges of goods and services between those with more and those with less power, “a long term relationship of unequal power in which identifiable actors exchange goods and services that often involve political allegiance” (7). Exchange—usually of votes, for tangible benefits—does indeed undermine the notion of citizenship rights to state-provided goods and services, she suggests, but does not necessarily weaken democratic political regimes. At times, and as argued by several contributors to the volume, it can help hold such regimes together as they become more institutionalized and as resource constraints become less pressing.

Hilgers and her contributors present evidence that where conditions of political and economic equality are severely restricted and formal democratic rules are not always broadly practiced, clientelism is likely to flourish for very good reasons. As Jon Shefner explains, “Especially in periods of scarce resources, clientelist politics will remain a rational alternative for the poor, and a strategy of both social control and social provision for the state” (58). It is a form of representation amid scarcity and poverty, useful to individuals and organized communities, and based on rational strategies for interacting with existing power structures. Jonathan Fox emphasizes the extent to which democratic processes are often described in the ideal, but practiced in a context of both formal and informal power that encourages clientelism. It is not about the persistence of traditional social relationships; it is about solving problems in an imperfect world where economic and political power are unequally distributed.

In Latin American countries where inequality and uncertainly characterize the lives of many, the impact of clientelism on democracy can be varied and ambiguous. Indeed, case studies in this volume, many of them of local level political interactions, suggest that “clientelism can *erode, accompany, and/or supplement* democratic processes” (4, emphasis in original). In the real world, the poor and others can use clientelism to extract goods and services from political parties and the state; they may be able manipulate elites into greater responsiveness to their needs, and they may even learn important democratic skills, such as the capacity to negotiate, from participating in clientelistic networks. At the same time, elites have opportunities to use clientelism to constrict political participation and to increase the dependence of voters on particularistic distributions of public resources, especially among low-income sectors of a population. Importantly, the nature of clientelism can change over time, in some cases increasing the extent to which competition among elites ensures greater satisfaction of needs. Democ-

racy and clientelism overlap, according to Hilgers and contributors, and the editor argues for a carefully limited definition of the phenomenon if progress is to be made in understanding how it interacts with other forms of political action.

A chapter by Luis Roniger reviews evidence from four Latin American countries to demonstrate the diverse and sometimes ambiguous impact of clientelism on democratic politics, demonstrating its resilience in contexts of inequality. Several other chapters indicate the extent to which it accompanies or supplements democratic interactions. For example, Eduardo Canel argues that in Montevideo, Uruguay, traditions of clientelist politics imbued citizens with skills in negotiation and pragmatism that were useful when democratic institutions sought to curtail clientelism, and helped them adapt more effectively than those who had learned more confrontational and partisan skills for interacting with government. For Julián Durazo Herrmann, politics in Mexico's Oaxaca State involved the use of clientelism to enhance the elite brokerage role of governors in their control over critical resources desired by local residents, but also allowed their political opponents to mobilize clients for alternative and more democratic political initiatives; hybrid uses of clientelism also characterized politics in Bahia, Brazil. Françoise Montambeault, writing about participatory budgeting and its interaction with clientelistic politics in Recife, Brazil, indicates that individualistic forms of extracting goods and services from the state can also characterize collective action by subordinate groups. Clientelism is not democratic, she argues, but it is not antithetical to democracy either.

Other contributors suggest how clientelism erodes democratic processes. Robert Gay, in exploring the link between clientelism and violence in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, indicates that increases in insecurity and violence undermined the democratic norms that encouraged civil society to organize and communities to demand effective political participation; it has driven the poor back upon time-honored mechanisms for protecting themselves in a context of uncertainty. Similarly, Pablo Lapegna and Javier Auyero, using evidence from a violent political act in El Alto, Bolivia, demonstrate the links between clientelistic politics and violence, and suggest how it encourages elite impunity and inequalities in power.

The case studies in the Hilgers volume pay particular attention to the definition of clientelism and its capacity to persist and to evolve over time in particular contexts. In a volume edited by Diego Abente Brun and Larry Diamond, *Clientelism, Social Policy, and the Quality of Democracy*, similar concern for conceptual clarity, time, and context suggests that clientelism is almost certain to have negative consequences for democratic institutions and participation. For its contributors, poverty and exclusion encourage particularistic approaches to power and undermine fairness in the distribution of resources and the capacity to hold politicians accountable, even while they may add to the stability of a regime. Yet, "in the medium and long run [clientelistic networks and practices] adversely affect the quality of democracy, for clientelism cannot substitute for citizenship" (11–12).

As in the Hilgers volume, for contributors to the Abente Brun and Diamond volume, clientelism is a rational mechanism for the poor to acquire resources and for elites to maximize their political power through the particularistic distribu-

tion of scarce resources. A variety of goods and services can "reach their beneficiaries in a relatively expeditious manner in exchange for political support and/or loyalty," exchanges that typically create networks and persist over time (4). Yet case studies from several Latin American countries indicate that inequality, maldistribution of public resources, corruption, and manipulation of the poor are regular results. The editors are clear: in clientelist systems, "political elites hijack the political citizenry of the dispossessed in exchange for a low-quality social citizenship" (11).

Contributors to this volume agree on the rational nature of clientelist exchanges. "Voters," write Ernesto Calvo and María Victoria Murillo, "are self-interested social actors, embedded in a complex web of political networks, who update their preferences based on information about the likelihood of receiving public and private benefits from parties" (19–20). Parties have opportunities to reward voters either through the clientelist networks or through more programmatic and objective criteria. Their choices are shaped by the extent to which distributional rules are enforceable. Thus, even the distribution of clearly targeted social assistance, such as conditional cash transfers, can be bent to political purposes where formal rules about who should benefit are not clear or not implemented. In Argentina, clientelist political parties flourish in a context of politicized resource distribution; in Chile, they are constrained by institutions that encourage parties to adhere to ideologies and programs that shape nonclientelistic expectations among voters.

According to Simeon Nichter, social policy in Brazil is distorted, as it is in Argentina, by clientelist networks that dampen political activity on the part of the poor, particularly in small communities and particularly where benefits are available to local politicians for distribution. In this case, decentralization strengthened clientelistic distribution, in contrast to a nationally managed conditional cash transfer program. This evidence adds to Beatriz Magaloni's assessment of possible options for undermining the hold of clientelism; she considers extensive decentralization to be an inducement to its persistence.

"The remarkably protean quality of clientelism" encouraged collective violence controlled by political elites, argues Javier Auyero in a case study of protest in Bolivia (90). And, while Magaloni and others suggest means to weaken the hold of clientelist politics, reform can be an uphill battle. In Colombia, write Kent Eaton and Christopher Chambers-Ju, it is so embedded in the political system that even reforms meant to weaken and eliminate it simply altered the identity of patrons and the networks they use. "In response to repeated reform efforts," they explain, "Colombia has shifted from a system of clientelism dominated by national party leaders, national legislators, and regional party bosses to a proliferation of new, more complex patron-client relations . . . a process of fragmentation and multiplication" (89).

Yet some countries do not follow the typical Latin American model of clientelist politics. In a chapter by Juan Pablo Luna and Rodrigo Mardones, Chilean parties have not established enduring political machines and the state is well institutionalized and relatively rule driven, both of which discourage clientelism. Nevertheless, while clientelistic exchanges of education transfers were discour-

aged by the characteristics of the party system, high state capacity provided political elites with good-quality information to make marginal adjustments in how resources were delivered for electoral benefit. Peruvian politics tend also to have low levels of clientelism, but Martin Tanaka and Carlos Meléndez ascribe this to the ephemeral nature of political parties in the country and their inability to sustain clientelist exchanges and networks over time. In their place, relatively independent political brokers have emerged that link social groups and parties and have weakened the power of political elites. Other chapters in this volume explore clientelism in Africa, Asia, and South Asia and find differences in clientelistic practices depending on the type of regime, the strength of the state, political parties, and civil society organizations. The world of clientelist politics is both broad and deep, this volume contends.

Two other volumes concerned with clientelism take more formal approaches to the topic, focusing on the electoral incentives of politicians to distribute goods and services through clientelistic networks. The authors paint a well-known form of politics based on the strategic exchange of votes for benefits, and through modeling and data-driven testing they are able to cast light on why such systems persist and become institutionalized, as well as how and when they seem to outlive their rationality.

For Susan Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco in *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, clientelism is a straightforward personal exchange of votes for benefits and tends to develop in contexts in which rules for distributing goods and services are informal and/or unenforceable. Without the clear rules defining programmatic distribution of benefits, and where it is combined with conditions for exchange, clientelism exists. The purpose of this volume is to explore how it works, how it might be replaced by other forms of resource distribution, and its incompatibility with democratic processes of decision making and resource distribution that characterize the modern welfare state. The authors develop a formal model based on the rationality of clientelist exchanges to voters and party leaders. When such exchanges cease to be as rational, they will be superseded by other ways of garnering votes and winning elections—through programmatic appeals, for example. Clientelism as a distributional exchange is specific to time and place and “the demise of clientelism and machine politics is, in this sense, the prehistory of the welfare state” (6).

Central to the model presented by Stokes and colleagues are the brokers who mediate between parties and voters, playing particularly important roles in acquiring information and monitoring the actions of voters. Brokers are “local intermediaries who provide targeted benefits and solve problems for their followers” and who have “sustained and frequent interactions with voters, observing their individual behavior and gaining knowledge of their inclinations and preferences” (75). Essentially, they work for party leaders in their quest for electoral victories and are the linchpins in how resources are distributed at local levels. Their expertise is information about the needs of individual voters and about their reciprocal behavior, and political leaders have a difficult time monitoring

their activities, setting up a tension in the heart of the network of exchanges that characterize machine politics.

Brokers have their own interests and concerns and have some discretion over the allocation of resources, given their greater information and face-to-face interaction with voters. Where machine politics dominate, brokers are powerful and necessary and party elites are concerned about their capacity to accumulate power. Party leaders will thus seek in various ways to control the distributional activities of party-based brokers. Where brokers have become particularly threatening to the power of elites, those leaders will seek other ways to reach voters and win elections. They are likely to find them when contextual changes affect the relative power of voters, brokers, and politicians. As political systems engage more voters, acquire more resources to distribute, or are characterized by those less dependent on tangible benefits (such as an expanding middle class), it is possible to anticipate the demise of widespread clientelism as party leaders find other means to mobilize support. In an extensive discussion of the transition away from clientelist politics in Britain and the United States, the authors demonstrate the gradual decline of vote buying.

Extensive microlevel data from Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, and India allow the authors to investigate the utility of their model and its basis in individual rationality. They find that brokers do play important roles in interactions with voters and “seek to build local power bases, often by rewarding ‘their’ voters” (95). In contrast to models that emphasize the importance of targeting swing voters with benefits, this evidence suggests that brokers tend to target loyal voters but also to reach beyond them as a way of building their networks. As the networks of clients expand, the possibility that brokers will use the distribution of benefits to enhance their own power increases, and party leaders may become disaffected with clientelism as a form of vote getting. Over time, they may turn to distribution strategies that are less personal and more congenial with democratic norms of citizenship and rights. This is especially true when the easiest targets of clientelist exchanges, the poor, become less critical to electoral victories.

The “broker-mediated theory of clientelism” developed by Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, and Brusco is rigorous in its assumptions and assessment methods. The authors find that data analysis about how clientelism works confirms much conventional wisdom, but they provide new insights into why brokers focus on mobilizing loyal voters, the mixed motives of brokers, the agency dilemmas faced by party leaders in attempting to control clientelist networks, and the transition from clientelist to more democratic forms of distribution. Among the four volumes reviewed here, this is the most assertive in building theory.

Mariela Szwarcberg also uses a formal approach to explore clientelist politics, this time based on network analysis and focused on politics in Argentina. Similar to the approach of Stokes and colleagues, she defines clientelism broadly as an exchange of political support for benefits or problem solving for individual voters. Brokers are also central to her analysis, and she is particularly interested in their motivations to use clientelism to mobilize votes or to use other kinds of strategies to win elections. In this case, brokers aspire to hold political office, and thus

become part of layered networks in which they have incentives to follow party leaders. How they construct and maintain their networks helps explain when clientelism persists over time and when it does not. Thus, network analysis allows Szwarberg to “describe the position and strategic decision making of each member within a clientelistic political machine . . . party bosses, brokers, activists, and voters in each network” (2). Each actor faces incentives to engage in clientelistic politics, and those incentives can vary across space and time. Unfortunately for democratic processes, Szwarberg finds that the incentives are perverse in that they tend to institutionalize clientelist politics and encourage politicized distribution of state-provided goods and services.

Szwarberg notes that the microfoundations of clientelistic exchanges—strategic individual decisions within hierarchical networks—can become institutionalized as clientelist politics at local, regional, and national levels. Focusing on political interactions in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Córdoba, she presents detailed data on voting, attendance at political rallies, the careers of political activists, and the construction of political, partisan, and social networks that are used by candidates and other party operatives to mobilize votes. Political networks that link voters, party activists, brokers, and leaders with partisan networks that provide access to resources that can be used to build party networks tend to engender more clientelism; social networks are more likely to engender trust and provide a way to challenge clientelist politics. The complexity of Argentina’s politics is built around the way candidates are embedded in these networks and their ability to use the resources they provide.

The extent and regularity of access to party- and state-provided goods and services that can be allocated to voters in exchange for political support is one factor that influences brokers to build clientelistic networks; when they have such access, uses of benefits in exchange for votes leads to greater electoral success than when they do not have such access or when they prefer not to use it in clientelist fashion. Indeed, Szwarberg finds a significant number of those who have access to distributive goods but prefer not to allocate them through clientelist networks, but argues that they are likely to be committing political suicide when they reject such practices. Despite such agency in selecting clientelist practices or not, the logic of such a system of rewards and punishments encourages the institutionalization of clientelism. It also tends to favor entrenched political machines. She shows that “low levels of electoral volatility result from the consolidation of machine politics” (3).

The perverse incentives that encourage clientelist practices especially mute the political voice of the poor, as they are most susceptible to the offer of tangible benefits in exchange for their votes. In addition, when such incentives persist, clientelist practices become institutionalized, particularly at local levels, and democratic participation suffers in the context of machinelike political parties. But, as Szwarberg concludes, party leaders who reward brokers based on the number of votes they mobilize “build their own Frankenssteins” (142). That is, party leaders will be confronted by brokers in their networks that seek to build their clienteles to the point that they can compete with existing leaders, seeking to replace them in a hierarchy of party and electoral power. She thus builds on insights from the

Stokes et al. volume, although she is less optimistic about the potential for transitioning away from clientelist and machine politics.

The books reviewed here suggest that clientelism is an important institution to explore in the context of the third wave of democratization around the world and particularly in Latin America. It challenges democratic ideals of citizenship, participation, representation, and accountability. Studies of the phenomenon, however, can differ in how strictly they define it: Is any exchange of votes for benefits a clientelist interaction? Is vote buying different from pork-barrel politics? Is it different from a more personalized exchange? And studies of clientelism differ in the extent to which they see institutional and contextual factors or the strategic actions of individuals as important in clientelism's persistence over time. For some, clientelism is likely to abate when poverty and resource scarcity are less characteristic of political systems; for others, alternatives to clientelism require not only contextual change but also the availability of more rational ways to mobilize votes and win elections.

Some argue that clientelism is inherently undemocratic in that it captures citizens, particularly poor ones, in political relationships that mute their voices and policy preferences and that even promote violence. Others argue that clientelist political participation can at times encourage more democratic forms of political interaction and certainly contribute to political stability as more democratic institutions develop. The difference in perspective matters because it reflects on the extent to which more democratic processes can be anticipated where clientelism is deeply embedded in the political arena. This is a critical consideration in the political futures of Latin American countries, where clientelism has often been a way of life for voters, brokers, and leaders.