

## Mobilizing poor voters: machine politics, clientelism, and social networks in Argentina

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Mariela Szwarcberg, *Mobilizing poor voters: machine politics, clientelism, and social networks in Argentina*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, ISBN 10 110711408X, ISBN 13 9781107114081 (hbk), 192 pp

It is not easy to read something new about clientelism, let alone something new about clientelism in Argentina—a country that has been extensively studied by distributive politics scholars. However, Mariela Szwarcberg's wonderful book sheds new light on this crowded field by unpacking for us the incentives and preferences of the political broker—an actor that has been largely ignored by the literature (though see also Stokes et al 2013). By studying the relationships between brokers and voters and between brokers and bosses, Szwarcberg discovers a logic of perverse incentives that encourages brokers to employ clientelism to mobilize poor voters.

Drawing on extensive and impressive ethnographic fieldwork in several municipalities in Argentina, *Mobilizing poor voters* provides a convincing explanation for the persistence of clientelism in new democracies. Having gained unique access to political bosses, brokers and clients, Szwarcberg's narrative is full of interesting, provocative and sometimes troubling quotes that demonstrate precisely why clientelism is an effective strategy for mobilizing poor voters. More importantly, and this is probably one the most original contributions of the book, the author finds that brokers are rewarded and punished according to their capacity for mobilization regardless of the means used to achieve that goal. Ambitious political brokers, then, have huge incentives to use clientelism for mobilization. Meanwhile, those brokers that lack the resources or the willingness to use clientelistic strategies are less successful and are gradually eliminated over time.

The book starts with an exploration of the decision of whether or not political brokers employ clientelistic strategies. According to Szwarcberg, the use of clientelism is conditional on two factors: whether the broker has the means to use clientelism, and whether she chooses to do so. Regarding the first factor, Szwarcberg provides a detailed description of the partisan networks that provide candidates with access to material and non-material resources. Key to this access is whether the broker has connections to the local, provincial or national governments. Candidates with no access to government resources—typically ones from the opposition party—cannot use clientelistic strategies. But not all candidates that are able to use clientelistic strategies chose to do so. Some, “idealistic”, candidates refuse to engage in this type of political mobilization. Only “pragmatic brokers”—those who have the resources to use clientelism and choose to do so—actually engage in clientelistic exchanges.

Measuring clientelism is particularly difficult. Most measures rely on survey questions that tend to suffer from social desirability bias. Both voters and brokers have incentives to lie when asked about a practice that is often illegal and almost always seen as illegitimate—particularly for those not involved in the clientelistic arrangement. Recently, scholars have started to pay more attention to this issue, implementing different techniques such as list or survey experiments to try to get a more accurate measure of clientelism (see, for instance, Gonzalez-Ocantos et al 2012). Szwarcberg opts for a different and novel strategy that provides us with an observable measure of clientelism that is not dependent upon survey questions. She considers that a broker engages in clientelistic strategies of mobilization when that broker takes attendance of clients' participation at rallies. She argues that brokers who solve voters' problems with material and non-material resources in exchange for their participation during rallies and elections will monitor voters' participation. This monitoring behaviour is considered to be essential as, without monitoring participation, brokers run the risk of wasting resources on voters who do not comply with their side of the deal.

Using this novel measure, obtained through participant observation, Szwarcberg is able to show that brokers who employ clientelism are more successful at mobilizing voters than those that do not. To make matters worse—and this is the fundamental insight of Szwarcberg's excellent book—brokers are rewarded and punished based on the number of voters they mobilize at rallies. This self-reinforcing dynamic encourages brokers to continue using clientelism. Just as brokers monitor the behaviour of clients in order to decide whether or not to help clients with their problems, bosses monitor the behaviour of brokers in order to decide whether or not to help them with their political careers. Bosses assume that turnout at rallies will translate into votes on election day, and they reward brokers who succeed in turning out voters at rallies. The consolidation of clientelism, then, emerges as the unintended consequence of a system that rewards brokers based on their mobilization capacity regardless of the means employed. To the extent that brokers can mobilize voters with clientelism, and that bosses find the mobilization capacity of brokers at rallies a reliable tool to measure their effectiveness, there is no incentive for either party to curb the use of clientelism.

The book concludes with two chapters that test the argument on the logic of perverse incentives in different settings. First, Szwarcberg shows that the relationships between brokers and bosses that she studies at the local level get replicated between mayors and governors and between mayors and presidents. Mayors that succeed at mobilizing voters get rewarded with the political support of provincial or national leaders. And since clientelistic strategies of mobilization are effective, this means that local leaders are encouraged to use clientelism if they want to get reelected or promoted. Second, the argument is tested on the cases of Peru and Mexico, showing how the logic of perverse incentives might be extended to other countries in Latin America and perhaps new democracies in other regions as well.

All in all, *Mobilizing poor voters* offers new insights to a hotly debated field while showing the value of careful and dedicated field research. The combination of participant observation, extensive interviews, surveys and archival research allows Szwarcberg to test the logic of perverse incentives with different data. Ultimately, this approach pays off, allowing readers to place greater confidence in her argument. The book, in short, is a must-read for anyone interested in electoral

mobilization and clientelism, as well as for anyone interested in learning how rigorous ethnography should be executed.

## References

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