

Political Clientelism—Beyond the Public Choice Explanation

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical perspectives and dynamics of voter-politician relationships, the determinants of voting behaviours and the parameters of electoral mechanisms in local governance with specific reference to the post-colonial societies in developing countries. The discussion begins with the distinguishing clientelism from other phenomena like corruption and pork barrel politics with specific reference to local governance. The impact of patronage employment and socio-economic fragmentation on the outcomes of pork barrel politics is evaluated in order to assess the dynamics of voting patterns. In addition, the paper also includes a discourse based on arguments that run counter to the public choice explanation of clientelistic exchanges. The identification of these antithetical stances to public choice theory will reveal why various forms of clientelism in certain societies make the overnight paradigm shift to a new form of political organisation, extremely complex.

Keywords: Clientelism; Social Heterogeneity; Elite Capture; Patronage Employment; Voting Behaviour

Corruption, Clientelism and Pork Barrel Politics

The nomenclature of political phenomena carries with it certain meanings and assumptions that signify specific ideological and theoretical orientations. In order to setup an analytical framework for the assessment of any political phenomenon, the distinction of differing meanings is critical because it helps to clarify the involved intricacies that emanate from competing political perceptions. The term political clientelism is quite broadly used which makes it open to varying interpretations and is therefore often misconstrued in relation to other distinct phenomena. Clientelism is the delivery of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron (politician) uses is simply: did you (or will you) support me (Stokes, 2007)? Stokes' definition of clientelism refers to a relationship between a voter and politician who enter into an informal contract of mutual exchange of vote in return for personalised provision of public goods and services.

Similarly, Klingemann et al. (1994) and Przeworsky et al. (1999) note that the clientelistic linkages between the voter and politician facilitate a direct exchange whereby the voters trade in their votes in return for personalised material resources provided by the politicians; voters enter into such exchanges because

they find it difficult to follow a cumbersome and time-consuming process of aggregating their interests for policies that would benefit the wider electorate. Both of the above-mentioned definitions imply that an individual voter can trade in their single vote in return for highly personalised favours however, it is argued (detailed in later part of the paper) that an individual vote's value is highly insignificant and hence cannot be used in a clientelistic exchange as a bargaining instrument in return for a highly personalised favour. Therefore, in the clientelistic exchanges, it is indeed the group of voters that can be instrumental and not a single vote *per se*.

The balance of bargaining power between voters' groups and politicians in clientelistic relationships varies from case to case however clientelistic exchanges may lead to linkages that are based on subservience or lopsided friendships (Cain et al., 1987). Despite the evident possibilities of imbalance in bargaining powers (of voters and politicians alike) in patron-client relationships, the impact of clientelistic practice is less unfavourable than the impact of corruption. The terms clientelism and corruption are different as the two phenomena have some distinct features. Máiz and Requejo (n.d) distinguish between clientelism and corruption. They refer to Caciagli (1996), della Porta (1992) and Johnston (1986) who point out significant differences between corruption and clientelism as follows. The two phenomena differ in terms of resources employed (money versus votes), actors involved (civil servants versus voters and patron/broker), and presence of power (asymmetry versus equality, illegality versus legality and secret versus public). To rephrase, corruption involves money, civil servants, asymmetrical relationships in terms of power, is illegal and covert. On the other hand, clientelism involves voters, patron/broker/politicians, equality (arguable in many cases) in patron-client relationships, is legal (if not fair), and overt.

The distinction between the clientelism and pork barrel politics provides further insights into the complex dynamics of voter-politician relationships. In analysing the economic costs of clientelist politics, Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) argue that hiring family relatives for administrative jobs should not diminish the quality of the public works, provided the relatives are qualified to do the jobs. With this argument, they point out towards a relatively less detrimental by-product of clientelistic relationship i.e. 'pork barrel' approach. Pork barrel refers to the publicly funded projects promoted by legislators to bring money and jobs to their own districts, as a political favour to local politicians or citizens. 'Pork' is not allocated on the basis of merit or need rather it is allocated on the basis of priorities of legislators in order to secure local support, making it legal yet unfair at times. Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith's argument prefer pork barrel approach over the highly individualised patron-client payoffs for the reason that more people have the opportunity of gaining from it. However, at the same time, they believe

that more than poverty, it is the higher levels of income inequalities in societies that worsen the impact of pork barrel politics.

Patron-Client Model: Insights from Public Choice Theory

Public choice theory is based on the principles of rational choice assumption that forms the foundation of neo-classical economics. Hence, public choice theory is the political equivalent for the consumers' rationality theory of economics. With the assumption that voters are economically rational, the public choice theory assumes that clientelistic exchanges involve patrons and individual voters. In addition, the principles of the public choice theory also emphasise that political markets are imperfect for several reasons. For instance, the assumption that political markets are perfectly competitive would imply that the poor classes of society should get more public goods and efficient redistribution as they are in majority in most of the cases but information asymmetries between the patrons and clients explain that this does not happen normally (Rolls, 2008). Illustrating this point, Keefer and Khemani (2005) argue that the failure in the political market - clientelistic exchange between voters and politicians - is the outcome of two key factors i.e. voters' imperfect information and the lack of credibility of political agents. Keefer & Vlaicu (2008) believe that when citizens lack information about how politicians' decisions influence their welfare, they cannot punish politicians for performance failures nor reward them for success. Hence, the information asymmetries incentivise politicians to be more responsive to the informed citizens only. This argument denotes a situation in which the information asymmetries leave the voter in a vulnerable position in a lopsided relationship that is favourable to the politician. Downs (1957) suggests that voters remain ignorant and underprivileged in an information asymmetry situation because the individual cost of acquiring information is higher when compared with the benefits derived from it.

The above-mentioned public choice arguments draw parallels between the politician-voter's clientelistic relationships and parties involved in business transactions. Powell (1970) argues that the two agents in clientelistic relations are unequal in status, wealth or influence and their relationship depends on reciprocity in exchange for goods and services. The points made in terms of information asymmetries are reasonable in a sense that the politician-voter relationships are not always symmetrical, and voters are not always well-informed as compared to their respective politicians. For instance, Kitschelt (2000) opines that clientelism involves a reciprocal deal and voluntarism but also exploitation and domination because the low-income groups in a society discount future and rely on short-term and instant advantages. Therefore, clientelist exchanges tend to become more attractive for voters as compared to broader programmatic linkages that promise uncertain and distant rewards. Such

situations provide the politicians with extra leverage that enables them to capitalise on voters' limited information.

In general, these explanations fail to take into account the critical point that an individual vote cannot be traded in effectively in return for personalised favour and therefore the voter-politician relationship in clientelistic exchange needs to be perceived differently than a business transaction. This is due to the fact that unlike a business exchange, the clientelistic exchange involves group(s) of voters rather than an individual voter. Clientelism can instead be understood as a group phenomenon where groups of voters can come together in order to enhance their position in a clientelistic deal. The probability of information asymmetry also diminishes when group(s) of voters (not an uninformed individual) and are taken into consideration in clientelistic exchanges. It is believed that the magic of aggregation (discussed in the later part of the paper) can potentially level the information asymmetries and improve the position of voters' groups in comparison with politicians.

Explaining, the second factor that aggravates political market imperfections, Keefer and Vlaicu (2008) are of the opinion that the lack of credibility leads politicians to prefer narrowly targeted policies over the broader public goods provision. Given that the credibility of politicians depends on their personal characteristics and their relationships with voters, decentralisation of government leads to the proliferation of politicians and hence with a choice of candidates available, voters can pressurise them to perform better (Keefer et al., 2005). There is however no evidence that mere proliferation of political candidates would actually pressurise them to perform better. Even with the proliferation of candidates, the politicians' propensity towards pork barrel approach is likely to remain the same because the lack of politicians' credibility not only depends on their personal characteristics and relations with voters but also on the availability of resources that a politician can direct towards their electorate. One of the major reasons that coerces political agents to target narrow provision of goods and services is the scarcity of resources available to them for public spending.

Politicians are compelled to resort to pork barrel spending because they have limited resources that can be spent on a fraction of electorate and not because they want to put their credibility at stake by targeting the available resources to specific groups. Besides that, it is important to note that the problem of credibility is two-sided i.e. just like politicians have the propensity to renege on pre-electoral promises, the voter can also breach the promise and instead can vote for any other candidate (Robinson and Verdier, 2013). Keeping in view, the lack of voters' credibility and limited availability of resources, politicians would be more incentivised to target the public goods and services to a narrow group of

citizens. Pork barrel spending may not be a desirable strategy for politicians however considering the financial restraints, this approach is the most pragmatic option for them to establish or revamp their political credibility.

Socio-Political Groups in Clientelistic Exchanges

Political clientelism is not an individual's problem, indeed it is a group phenomenon (Lamerchand, 1972). Most of the political promises are made to the groups of voters and when socio-economic groups are involved in clientelistic exchange, it transforms clientelistic politics into the pork barrel politics. Garcia-Guadilla and Perez (2002) gives the example of neighbourhood associations representing collective interests that use the political power of groups of voters as a collective entity legitimated by the process of decentralisation. The same may be true about groups composed of families, clans, sects, businesses and professional associations. In case of clientelistic relationships with the groups of voters, political competitors need to spend resources to ameliorate collective problems. Whether the group receives the benefit or not depends very little on the voting behaviour of any single member of that group (Keefer and Vlaicu, 2008). Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) argue that clientelism may have socially desirable by-products e.g. healthy competition among political groups. In many democratic systems, interest groupings based on occupation or social class form lobbies. In case of balance among these groups, pork barrel politics can benefit various sections of political and civil society and hence clientelism, according to them, is not just simply a zero-sum game over narrowly self-serving projects and programs.

They continue to argue that beneficial spillovers (positive externalities) of clientelism can help in absence of politicians' monopoly in patronage, or as long as their voters have freedom to switch alliances. Besides that, groups vying for government favours inadvertently prevent socially harmful policies and/or promote beneficial public policies. Such arguable positive dimensions of pork barrel politics apparently imply that pork barrel approach is one of the strategies that can incentivise the involvement of political actors in the political process however it can be argued that the contextual realities associated with the social and political organisation of diverse societies radically transform the impact of pork barrel politics. The following discussion addresses the question as to why despite the involvement of some of the socio-political groups, the system of pork barrel politics reinforces itself instead of involving more groups.

Pork Barrel Politics and Socio-Economic Fragmentation

Generally, the public accountability and equitable distribution of public goods under any form of clientelistic political setup is very hard to be institutionalised, both formally and informally. The clientelistic linkage distributes material

benefits exclusively to party stalwarts and other groups of voters who vote for the party that offers the benefits, eventually generating a particularistic type of accountability in which the voters demand individual favours or services from the politician, ignoring broader public policies' criteria (Máiz and Requejo, n.d). Similarly, Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) argue that patron-client relationships are prone to misunderstanding and manipulation because no independent entity keeps an eye on them. This is rather a pessimistic opinion of Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith as it defies their own proposition that clientelism can also promote healthy competition among the social groups of the society. It is argued that although patron-client relationships are prone to manipulation, the competition among social and political groups can serve as a deterrent to manipulation and is likely to keep a constant check on clientelistic exchanges. Nonetheless, the critical question i.e. whether or not pork barrel politics can promote competition needs further explanation.

The impact of socio-political groups' involvement can be effective only when they are socially and politically engaged as competing actors in the political process. However, it is observed that although a multitude of socio-political groups exist in societies, the low levels of their civic engagement and political activism maintain the status quo of pork barrel politics rather than promoting healthy competition among them. Consequently, many segments of society continue to suffer as they are left out of the clientelistic deals altogether. Pork barrel approach reckoned as being socially desirable and generating positive externalities may well be justified owing to some specific success stories nonetheless, at large, the exclusion of numerous under-privileged groups from the social services delivery networks is part and parcel of the deal. Due to the social fragmentation and economic polarisation, narrow targeting of goods and services under clientelistic obligations exclude those groups that find it hard to collectivise and organise into aggregate entities that would help them articulate their interests and hence make their participation meaningful in the formulation of public policy. For several reasons, it is also not easy for the masses of citizenry in underdeveloped countries to be a part of the existing social and political pressure groups. The factors that undermine the civic and political engagement of the groups are the factors that affect the way in which the strategies for pork barrel politics are designed and implemented. Other than the socio-political intricacies, the pork barrel approach is also positively associated with socio-economic complexities.

Manor (1999) believes that when disparities between the rich and poor and/or conflicts between social groups are deep-rooted, it is extremely difficult to make decentralisation work. The higher income inequalities are, the more difficult it is to prioritise public development projects. Social demands and developmental

needs of various social groups in a society vary a great deal. Such dilemmas also make it difficult for politicians to prioritise the public policy options. ‘Rational’ politicians would thus go for the option that will secure for them a better payoff in the form of votes, even if it not economically viable or socially desirable. This argument is well epitomised by Foster and Rosenzweig (2001) who focus on three categories of public goods which account for 73 % of the activities of village governments in their sample from India - roads, irrigation, and schools. They find that the democratically elected village governments provide all three public goods, but the emphasis is on irrigation - the service that is most likely to benefit the rural elite. In villages with a high proportion of landless citizens, public investment had shifted from irrigation to road construction, suggesting that capture by elites can be tackled when the numerical strength of the poor increases. However, it happens in a manner that might not be the most efficient in terms of extending benefits to the poor. Roads built by village governments primarily benefit the poor, but largely by raising their short-term wages, as local road construction and improvement initiatives in India serve as employment enhancement programs for the landless poor. On the other hand, education that has the most profound and positive impact on poverty alleviation in the medium and long-term, seems least affected by the local democratisation programmes.

Mani and Mukand (2007) describe the ‘visibility effect’ wherein politicians will provide those public services which are visible and for which the politicians can take credit. Hasnain (2005) referring to this malfeasance in Pakistan’s regional and national politics, argues that the improvements in service delivery, such as ensuring better quality teaching, unlike the provision of government jobs or construction of school buildings, do not pay back immediately to politicians in terms of a secured vote bank. Politicians make self- interested decisions to improve certain roads and sanitation services because such projects are highly noticeable public goods and services that can be targeted easily in a specific area within their electorate. Contrarily, fewer efforts are made in order to improve healthcare and education services wherein the exclusion is harder; requires hard work and resources; and most importantly, such improvements are least noticeable and therefore political office bearer derives little or no political mileage out of it.

Positive externalities of pork barrel thus proffer little benefits and as such, from a broader perspective, pork barrel politics may be seen as generating negative long-term economic and political spill-overs. In heterogeneous societies that are spread across different social and economic divisions, pork barrel criteria for public sector and development funds allocations intensify disparities among the marginalised groups rather than promoting positive competition between them. Fragmented and unstable political coalitions will result in each politician trying

to maximise his short-term payoff even if this comes at the expense of long-term social gains (Hasnain, 2005; Cheema, 2003; Rose-Ackerman, 1997). This practice is unjust because the loopholes in political and institutional policy are sought and exploited. In other words, in the absence of wider civic and political engagement, pork barrel politics are legitimised by the process of elections and such legitimacy is accompanied with enormous costs incurred by the socially excluded groups as Keefer (2007) argues that clientelistic exchanges incentivise the under-provision of non-targeted goods (e.g. universal education) and over-provision of targeted goods (e.g. public-sector jobs and public work projects).

Patronage Employment

Referring to the case of Pakistan, Jalal (1995) is of the opinion that a large public sector offers better chances for patronage employment where votes make a good tradable commodity. An individual voter may not have a substantial bargaining power, but voters are in a better position to capitalise on the synergy of their collective vote blocs i.e. where the vote banks become formations e.g. aggregated in groups like families, clans, tribes, ethnic groups, occupational groups and neighbourhood or business associations. Even in a large sized public sector like that of Pakistan's, the offer of patronage employment mostly remains limited in comparison with its high demands and hence patronage employment is highly valued because it is not just granted as a one-off clientelistic payoff. Politicians' instrumentality in the provision of employment adds to their credibility because one person's employment means a long-term personalised favour to a vote bloc or social group. It is obvious that patronage employments cannot be offered in return for individual votes. In fact, the very nature of patronage employment offer makes it indivisible and valuable for voters' groups therefore such speciality offers are usually offered by politicians in return for many secured votes from social groups. Other than considering vote blocs, politicians will also prefer to manipulate public sector employment in favour of their cronies or party workers so that the politicians can remain influential not only in the electoral circles but also in the public-sector departments.

For politicians, patronage employment has one more advantage. Besides securing a multitude of votes, patronage employment is safe and is revocable to a certain extent after the elections. Politicians also capitalise on the offer of patronage employment in more than just one election. Thus, an offer of a job is a dependable way of delivering patronage to specific groups of voters. When political behaviour is observable, a job has the additional advantage that it can be withdrawn as a punishment. Barbara Geddes formulated a patron-client game as a version of prisoner's dilemma, wherein politicians will lose electoral support unless they provide public employment along the partisan lines, and if the voters do not support the politician they lose their public employment that was provided

as a personal favour (Geddes, 1994). It is not only the issue of appointments into the public-sector departments that is critical for the impact assessment of patronage employment on politicians' credibility but also the affairs related to promotions and transfers (geographical and inter-departmental) that matters in local governance structure. In developing countries' bureaucratic public-sector establishments, matters related with appointment, postings and transfer are significantly critical in shaping up the inter-institutional working relationships because these matters are highly politicised.

Beyond Pork Barrel Politics: Identities and Preferences

This section of the paper highlights the rival explanatory approaches for the evaluation of voting behaviour that go beyond public choice explanation. As pointed out by Van Der Eijk and Franklin (2009), one of the factors that determines voting behaviour is the membership of and loyalty to different social groups defined by differences in class, religion, ethnicity and other similar features. If these social groups are critical in social conflict and social organisation, and/or if the membership of such groups is an important part of people's consciousness, then such groups are referred to as social cleavage groups and the dividing line between them is called as social cleavage (ibid). Such groups have, in common with political parties, some distinctive political interests (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). A variety of groups, institutions, individuals (serving as opinion leaders) and their respective values and orientations are critical in moulding public opinion. For instance, Rehman (1997) explains that primordialist theory of ethnicity proposes that shared paternity, bio-kinship, commonality of descent, and blood relationships truly create deep extra-rational bonds or sentiments for language, religion or other aspects of identity. These extra-rational or sentimental motivations in turn determine certain aspects of multi-dimensional voting behaviour of voters as well as politicians' response to those behaviours.

As explained earlier, public choice theorists reckon that clientelism is a result of two market imperfections, one of which is information asymmetry. The magic of aggregation is a counter explanation to the public choice theory's assumption of individual voter's predicament of information asymmetry. Van Der Eijk and Franklin (2009) describe the puzzle of ignorant voters and the magic of aggregation. According to this concept, people are knowledgeable in patches. The electorate that generally lacks general knowledge is most competent in precisely those areas that matter most to them. Hence, no single individual voter needs to have knowledge on all subjects relevant to public policy because public opinion is a collective phenomenon not an individual phenomenon. When individual opinions are aggregated to constitute public opinion, different aspects of it can come from different individuals and therefore the aggregate public entity

would be quite knowledgeable about most of the public policy aspects. This is the magic of aggregation which should, in principle, offset the information asymmetries between the patron and clients.

Caplan (2007) however is quite critical about the magic of aggregation and disapproves the public choice theory's assumption of voters' rationality as well. According to him, voters do not have rational beliefs, which they act upon rather they have 'preferences over beliefs'. Voters' beliefs (or knowledge) about economics (or rational choice) are systematically mistaken which worsen the outcomes of democracy and that is why the public choice assumptions cannot be reconciled with the fruitfulness of democracy. In other words, the magic of aggregation works only if voters do not make systematic errors but according to Caplan, voters' knowledge of economics or rational choice are riddled with systematic errors that lead to preferential bias. For instance, most of the voters are oblivious to the mechanism in which the 'invisible hand' in a free market economy harmonises private greed and public interest. Similarly, voters equate prosperity not with production but with employment. Such systematic errors show that voters are irrational because they believe in what they want to believe in i.e. they have mistaken preferences because they are unable to evaluate the available information rationally.

While comparing the consumer behaviour (economics) with voters' behaviour (politics), Caplan argues that, emotions and ideologies – and not just the facts or the processing of information – fundamentally affects human judgment and political behaviour. Human emotions and extra-rational ideologies override people's rationality because they ignore unwanted information on subjects, which they do not care about. Caplan's critical stance is quite rigid in a sense it does not accommodate perspectives like the logic of aggregation and groups' rationality. His antithetical stance against the potential of aggregated public opinion proposes that democracies end up in choosing bad public policies. Contrarily, the main line of argument developed in this paper suggests quite the opposite; it is argued that public policies are best devised and implemented under the elected democracies. However, Caplan's proposition does provide us with another important perspective for the assessment of voting behaviour which illustrates that ideologies and emotions play a critical role in explaining a social and political behaviour. For instance, religion is one of the extra-rational ideological motivations that shapes up voters' preferences over rational beliefs. Since the social phenomena under investigation in this paper are quite complex, a range of relevant explanatory perspectives are taken into account in order to explain the complex political behaviour of voters.

According to Waseem (2006), Columbia school of thought focuses on sociological perspectives to understand the dynamics of electoral behaviour while Downsian theory is based on voters' assessment of benefits in return for their votes. Nonetheless, there's no reason why these explanatory perceptions should be treated as mutually exclusive. Owing to the dynamics of human nature and groups' aggregate constraints, several competing or apparently contradictory motivating factors may have a collective impact on voters' voting behaviour simultaneously that would mould and at times, alter voters' electoral priorities. A pluralist approach can potentially take into account the economic rationality of socio-political groups, the logic of aggregation, voters' emotions and ideologies, sociological perspectives and positive group identities, all of which are believed to be determinants of voting patterns in elections.

Conclusion

Public choice theorists consider clientelism as an individual problem but another way of looking at it is to focus on groups of voters that are involved in exchange for their votes - referred to as pork barrel politics. As theorised in the 'magic of aggregation', voters' groups are informed and knowledgeable as a collective entity and the probability of information asymmetries diminishes when groups of voters are taken into consideration in clientelistic exchanges. In pork barrel politics, the credibility of politicians not only depends on their personal characteristics and relations with voters but also on the availability of resources that politicians can direct towards their electorates. Politicians are compelled to resort to pork barrel spending because they have limited resources that can be spent on a fraction of electorate and not because they want to jeopardise their credibility by targeting the available resources to specific groups.

Some scholars opine that pork barrel approach can potentially promote positive competition among different social and political groups nonetheless there are practical limitations to this argument. Although a multitude of socio-political groups exist in society, the low levels of their civic engagement and political activism perpetuate pork barrel politics rather than promoting healthy competition among them. The limitations in resources also make it difficult for politicians to prioritise development projects. Due to the social fragmentation and economic polarisation, narrow targeting of public goods and services under the clientelist obligations exclude those groups that find it hard to organise themselves into aggregate entities that would help them enhance their numerical strength and eventually be able to participate effectively in the political process. It is therefore argued that pork barrel politics generate negative economic and political externalities in the long run.

More specifically in heterogeneous societies, that are spread across different social and economic divisions, pork barrel criteria for public sector and development funds allocations incentivise the under-provision of non-targeted goods for instance universal education and basic health and over-provision of targeted goods for instance patronage employment and targeted public work projects. The key to overcome the problems of social exclusion lies in the improvement of civil engagement and political activism in the political process. Lamerchand and Legg (1972) anticipate that as rural elements become conscious of their numerical strength, organise themselves politically, and articulate their demands through the institutional channels, gaps are likely to develop in the clientelist system.

A range of different factors influence citizens' voting behaviour. It has been argued that the rationality of a social group can be one of the factors that explains groups' collective behaviour. In addition, loyalty to different social groups defined by their differences in class, religion, ethnicity, kinships, caste language, and other similar features also plays a critical role in determining the voting behaviour. Such primordial factors consolidate group identities that partly explain an important dimension of the voting behaviour of voters and politicians' response to them. Similarly, Caplan's critical idea of 'preferences over beliefs' provides another nuanced perspective for the assessment of voting behaviour, proposing that ideologies and emotions rather than the assumed rationality of voters, determine their electoral behaviour.

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