

Why is clientelism
such a prominent
source politics essay



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Clientelism as a method of electoral support is defined as “ the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?” (Stokes, 2007). Clientelism is a method that is most common in new democracies where there is a lack of infrastructure, state institutions are weak and where the citizens are not well off. This essay aims to first outline why clientelism is such an important source of electoral support in democracies by reviewing what various scholars have written about the issue. Secondly, this essay aims to use a case study of Pakistan to show how political clientelism is being used there to win elections. Thirdly, this essay will address the harm that clientelism causes to the democratic system of any country and discuss what factors are necessary for its influence to decline.

Many political scientists have written about the dilemma of clientelism that new democracies face all over the world. Keefer argues that younger democracies are significantly more corrupt than older democracies as they engage in more targeted transfers, and provide fewer public goods (Keefer, 2005). As stated above, new democracies tend to have a weak state structure and a large inequality gap between the rich and the poor. However there are many different definitions of clientelism and it is important to understand what different scholars have to say on the matter before proceeding forward with the argument. Robinson and Verdier define clientelism as an exchange of a public sector job for public support (Robinson, Verdier, 2003). Whitaker’s take on clientelism is that “ patronage, economic security and protection can be exchanged for personal loyalty and

obedience" (Stokes, 2007). Similarly, James Scott views clientelism as " an instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance including personal services, to the patron" (Scott, 1972: 92). In his paper, Wantchekon summarises a few different scholars' definitions of clientelism:

" Clientelism is defined as transactions between politicians and citizens whereby material favours are offered in return for political support at the polls... However, while the standard interest-group politics takes place in the context of organized competition among groups that could eventually lead to the representation of a variety of interests by one political party, clientelism is characterized by the representation of narrow corporatist and local interests. In addition, while the influence of interest groups tends to be filtered by the mechanisms of checks and balances, those mechanisms tend to be absent or ineffective in the context of clientelism" (Kugler, Rosenthal, 2000), (Wantchekon, 2003).

Although there are several different definitions of political clientelism in both academic and policy arenas, one compelling implication can be agreed upon by looking at the research and the case study below. Clientelism fosters a system that relies on personalities rather than institutions. It curbs economic growth and slows down development within a country because politicians focus their efforts on winning elections by taking advantage of poor, illiterate citizens by providing them small tokens in exchange for votes rather than

focusing on long term development or infrastructure which would be good
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for the country overall but would not appeal to the deprived electorate.

Stokes argues that rather than the common perception that clientelism is the consequence of poverty, it is possible that it is actually clientelism that generates poverty because political parties have a strong interest in preventing economic development and preventing the masses from getting educated or having better standards of living (Stokes, 2007).

An excellent case study to illustrate the practical use of political clientelism is Pakistan. Pakistan was created sixty five years ago and can be considered to be a new and unstable democracy. It has been subjected to repeated military takeovers, with intervals of corrupt democratic governments. Development indicators are low and the State institutions are weak and are used by politicians to achieve their personal and political gains rather than working to protect the people of Pakistan. There is a high level of inequality in terms of income and social class. In these conditions, clientelism in Pakistan is not only an important source of electoral support, rather it is the main source through which elections are fought and won. One major contributing factor for this is the dominant and strong feudal structure, which fits in with what Jonathan Hopkins says, " Clientelism is a way of describing the pattern of unequal, hierarchical exchange characteristic of feudal society, in which patrons and clients were tied to durable relationships by a powerful sense of obligation and duty" (Hopkins, 2006). Within Pakistan's feudal society there is widespread poverty and illiteracy and both these factors give rise to clientelism. According to Jamil Nasir:

" In Pakistan, the concentration of land in the hands of the feudal elite not only empowers them economically but also helps deepen the culture of
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patronage in rural areas. It establishes a patron-client relationship between the landlord and the landless. People are not free in the real sense to cast their votes according to their preferences. It is the landlord who determines political choices for them, despite the so-called secret ballot system” (Nasir, 2013).

Thus in most cases, it is simply a matter of survival for the serfs of the feudal lords, to vote where they are ordered to vote, as doing otherwise implies harsh consequences for them and their families.

Clientelism and patronage are ingrained within all sectors of society and political structure. The ‘ first past the post’ electoral system allows patron-client relationships to form as voters directly elect a candidate from their constituency whereas in a proportional representation system it would be much harder as there would be no personal relationship between a candidate and his voters. As Kitschelt argues,

“ The personalization of candidate competition through electoral rules facilitates clientelism, whereas rules that focus the contest on teams of politicians promote programmatic linkages. Personalized contests permit candidates and constituencies to organize, monitor, and enforce direct trades of support for favors flowing from office. In multimember electoral districts, personal preference votes for individual candidates rather than entire party lists make possible personalized trades.” (Kitschelt, 2000).

This personal relationship allows candidates the opportunity to offer favours, rewards and even threats to gain votes and since Pakistan is a feudal

society, the economist David Ricardo astutely argues that,
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“ It is the cruellest mockery to tell a man he may vote for ‘ A’ or ‘ B’, when you know that he is so much under the influence of person ‘ A’, or the friends of ‘ A’, that his voting for person ‘ B’ would be attended with the destruction of him. It is not he who has the vote, really and substantially, but his landlord, for it is for his benefit and interest that it is exercised in the present system.” (Nasir, 2013).

Thus in Pakistan, there is a dominant patron client relationship, and elected assemblies comprise mostly of rural landlords and the moneyed class. The political parties and candidates employ a mixture of tactics to ensure electoral support. Throughout a government’s term in office there are nationwide welfare projects that are aimed at giving benefits exclusively to particular constituencies of party supporters to make sure they vote for the party in the next elections. An example of this is the Benazir Income Support Program, a cash based welfare program initiated by the federal government to give financial support to those in need. However, there have been allegations that the distribution has been heavily skewed, providing benefits to the party’s supporters in the already existing electoral strongholds while depriving those who were truly in need. Jobs in government institutions are doled out without merit or need, burdening these institutions, contributing to failing efficiency and virtual collapse of public services like the national airlines, railways, health and education. White elephants are created, where ghost employees exist, drawing salaries but not contributing to the national economy or development. In all provinces, these ghost schools and health centres are to be found, on paper, while nothing exists on the ground. However such patronage ensures that the ‘ influentials’ of that area will

guarantee electoral support. This creates the need to find 'winnables' in constituencies. Thus each party vies for the area influential to be its candidate. On the flip side, such candidates negotiate for the highest bidder and feel no hesitation in switching parties if they find that they are getting more advantage from a rival party. An unfortunate implication of this entrenched system of clientelism is being played out in the current scenario in Pakistan. Imran Khan, a relatively new entrant in politics, shot to prominence in the recent years on the slogan and promise of change. People fed up with the status quo, flocked to his party, urging him to change the system. However, he soon realized that in the electoral system that exists today, an ordinary citizen, without money or influence, no matter how competent or upright, had very little chance of being elected, as the electorate was needy yet pragmatic and realised that the upright candidate could not get them jobs, security at the police station or influence in the rotten justice system. His party therefore started accepting 'winnable candidates' (Jerral 2011). These were people who were the same faces, but were switching loyalties anticipating the change in the public's mood and its disillusionment with the ruling parties. As a consequence, Imran Khan's party is now dominated by the same clique, making his chances of bringing 'change' very slim.

Another example of principles falling by the way side because of the phenomenon of clientelism was seen very recently when a national assembly member was disqualified for having submitted a fake degree. The same candidate, known for doling out undue favours to his constituents, was voted back by the people in the subsequent by-elections. It seemed that for the

people, desperate for favours, honesty was not the highest priority, when making an electoral choice. The level of poverty in Pakistan is so extreme that the deprived citizens of the country are willing to take small favours, protection, and cash rewards in exchange for their votes and it is this poverty that keeps this patronage politics alive in Pakistan. Main party politicians in Pakistan thrive on economic hardship and poverty because then they can easily buy votes in exchange for small short- term gains and in effect, such politicians make sure that Pakistan remains impoverished. As Morgan argues in his article,

“ The money that should be going into education, renewing decrepit infrastructure washed away in the floods of 2010, and investing in electricity generation is actually wasted through patronage. While this allows the large parties to create the illusion of popular support in the short term, it beggars the country over the longer term” (Morgan, 2011).

Clientelism has other detrimental effects as well. The ruling party in Punjab has been accused of turning a blind eye to sectarian and terrorist outfits and operations, in exchange for seat adjustments and votes in the upcoming elections (Mir 2013). This is fanning sectarianism and violence in the country.

Another problem with state institutions within Pakistan is that they are not separate and free from political influence. The bureaucracy in Pakistan is used by politicians to gain advantage in elections. The incumbent posts and transfers civil servants and police officials on the basis of loyalty rather than merit and people are promised government jobs in return for votes, an offer which seems very lucrative to the ordinary Pakistani. Wantchekon argues,

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“ First, clientelism generates excessive redistribution at the expense of the provision of public goods, as politicians wastefully divert government resources to favored segments of the electorate. Second, since budgetary procedures in many countries either lack transparency or are discretionary, clientelism tends to favor those already in control of the government and therefore consolidates incumbency advantage in democratic elections. Such advantage and the ensuing decline in political competition could incite the opposition to political violence, thereby generating political instability and possibly the collapse of the democratic process” (Wantchekon, 2003).

Close to the election the incumbent diverts the entire government machinery to gain votes. Funds are reserved till just before elections, when incumbent candidates announce large welfare projects in selected constituencies to influence vote casting. This is castigated as ‘ pre-poll rigging’ but no effective mechanisms exist to curb such flagrant practices of buying votes. . At the time of elections, public transport is used to carry supporters to election booths, free food and cash is offered and obstacles and even force is used to create obstacles for the opposition’s supporters with the help of the local police and administration.

To summarise therefore, according to James A. Robinson and Thierry Verdier, political clientelism is widespread in countries where firstly, the stakes from politics are high, secondly inequality is high and thirdly when money matters more than ideology in politics (Robinson, Verdier, 2003). Pakistan has been shown to be a prime example.

To answer the last part of the essay question, there are many conditions that could see the level of political clientelism decline in countries. Firstly, economic growth by building factories, giving business opportunities in rural areas will increase employment and increase the standard of living of poor people. As Professors Avinash Dixit and John Londregan have pointed out; low income groups whose marginal utility of income is high, will be much more prone to being bought out by politicians (Dixit, Londregan, 1996). Therefore, this empowerment of the people will make them less likely to be bought by politicians in exchange for small cash rewards.

Secondly, if the civil service is independent from political influence and jobs are awarded on the basis of merit rather than patronage, then politicians will not have the power to hand out jobs in exchange for votes. Jamil Nasir emphasizes this by stating that:

“ No job, no matter how petty it may be, should be given under the patronage system. Recruitments should be made in a transparent manner through public service commissions manned by persons of known integrity and competence. This principle should also apply to promotions and placements of the public sector employees” (Nasir, 2013).

Thirdly, clientelism will see a huge decline if a country has an independent and unbiased judiciary. The reason politicians can get away with patronage politics is because there is no real accountability for their actions. Measures should be taken to ensure that the government does not use tax payers' money and resources to provide a certain group of people with privileges in

exchange for votes while depriving the rest of the country. Wantchekon supports this argument by saying that:

“ if incumbency advantage over clientelism is empirically validated, it would imply that term limits and limited incumbent discretion on budgetary procedures would improve the delivery of public goods” (Wantchekon, 2003).

It would also be helpful if there was some sort of limit on spending for candidates running in elections. This will give all candidates an equal chance and prevent richer candidate from ‘ buying votes’.

Another condition that will see a decline in clientelism would be if a country has a strong and independent media. Such a media would act as a watchdog making people aware and capable of seeing through the games of the politicians.

Lastly, to decrease the level of clientelism it is very important that countries invest in education. Education will lead to people getting better jobs and standards of living improving. Educated people will also be more likely to understand the value of their vote and will not easily exchange it for small rewards. They will have a better understanding of their country’s problems and will prefer long term development rather than a temporary, short term solution that politicians offer them.

In conclusion, with the support of arguments presented above, this essay has attempted to show why clientelism is such an important source of electoral support. It has argued that clientelism is more common in new democracies where there is widespread poverty and where the state infrastructure is

weak and often corrupted. It has tried to illustrate how clientelism has detrimental effects on the democratic system of a country and how it fosters poverty and stunts economic growth because the whole political machinery operates on short term goals rather than the long term development that a new democracy desperately needs. Moreover, this essay has put all the literature in a practical context by giving a case study of Pakistan, which is a perfect illustration of a clientelist state. It is a new democracy plagued with clientelist practices which are hindering it from prospering. Lastly, keeping in mind the relevant literature, this essay has outlined all those major conditions that a country needs to adopt in order to decrease the influence that clientelism has over its political structure, maintaining that ultimately, investing in people and their development, is the most productive and long lasting strategy for progress.