

Brokering Votes: Clientelism in Comparative Perspective

February 27-28, 2015
Center on the Politics of Development
University of California, Berkeley

Objectives of conference:

Recent research has substantially advanced understanding of how clientelism works. Yet much work remains to reliably assess its causes and consequences. This conference aims to address two central challenges:

1. **Improving our comparative understanding of clientelism.** By bringing together scholars who study the topic in different countries and regions, the conference will highlight similarities and differences in the ways clientelism works across contexts. This can in turn shed light on important analytical questions with which scholars have grappled.

For example, recent scholarship has focused centrally on brokers—local intermediaries who stand between elites and voters, are embedded in local social networks, and can provide parties with rich information on voters' needs and preferences. However, the functions, objectives, and sources of power of local intermediaries varies across different kinds of brokers—from *punteros* in Argentina to religious authorities (*marabouts*) in Senegal to “new leaders” (*naya neta*) in India. Brokers vary with respect to:

- Whether they are formally affiliated with parties, and the ease with which they can switch partisan allegiances;
- How readily they influence voters' choices—e.g., the extent to which they can monitor votes or punish defections from clientelist bargains;
- The degree of ideological or partisan attachment in their electorates;
- Whether clientelism is “competitive” or is instead characterized by political monopolies.

Exploring this variation may in turn suggest reasons that clientelism may be more or less effective—and more or less attractive to political elites—across contexts. Thus, the set of papers presented at this conference will help to sharpen understanding of descriptive similarities and contrasts across settings and thus improve our comparative understanding of clientelism.

2. **Use strong designs to assess causes and consequences of clientelism.** Scholars have identified many factors that might promote or impede clientelism—such as political competition, economic development, or legacies of armed conflict. At the more micro level, direct cash transfers from central governments or new microfinance institutions might erode the power of local brokers. However, identifying the causal impact of such factors is challenging, for many of the usual reasons: e.g., selection, reverse causation, lack of manipulation. Thus, some of the more interesting

hypotheses in research on clientelism are difficult to test using standard observational designs.

In consequence, many scholars have begun to develop innovative research designs that can provide stronger empirical evidence on the causes and consequences of clientelism, for example using novel natural, quasi-, or randomized controlled experiments. A second goal of the conference is therefore both to:

- Highlight innovative empirical research on the causes and consequences of clientelism;
- Prospectively discuss research designs and pre-analysis plans, before the studies are put into the field.

The focus on both completed research and research that has yet to go into the field provides an opportunity to move forward research on some of the thornier questions in the study of clientelism. Thus, the conference is meant to be forward-looking, even as it provides an opportunity to leverage and discuss results from existing research.

Format. Given the objectives described above, the conference will feature two types of presentations:

1. Results from completed research/working papers;
2. Prospective research designs or pre-analysis plans.

Session chairs and formal discussants will kick off each panel, consisting of thematically related papers.