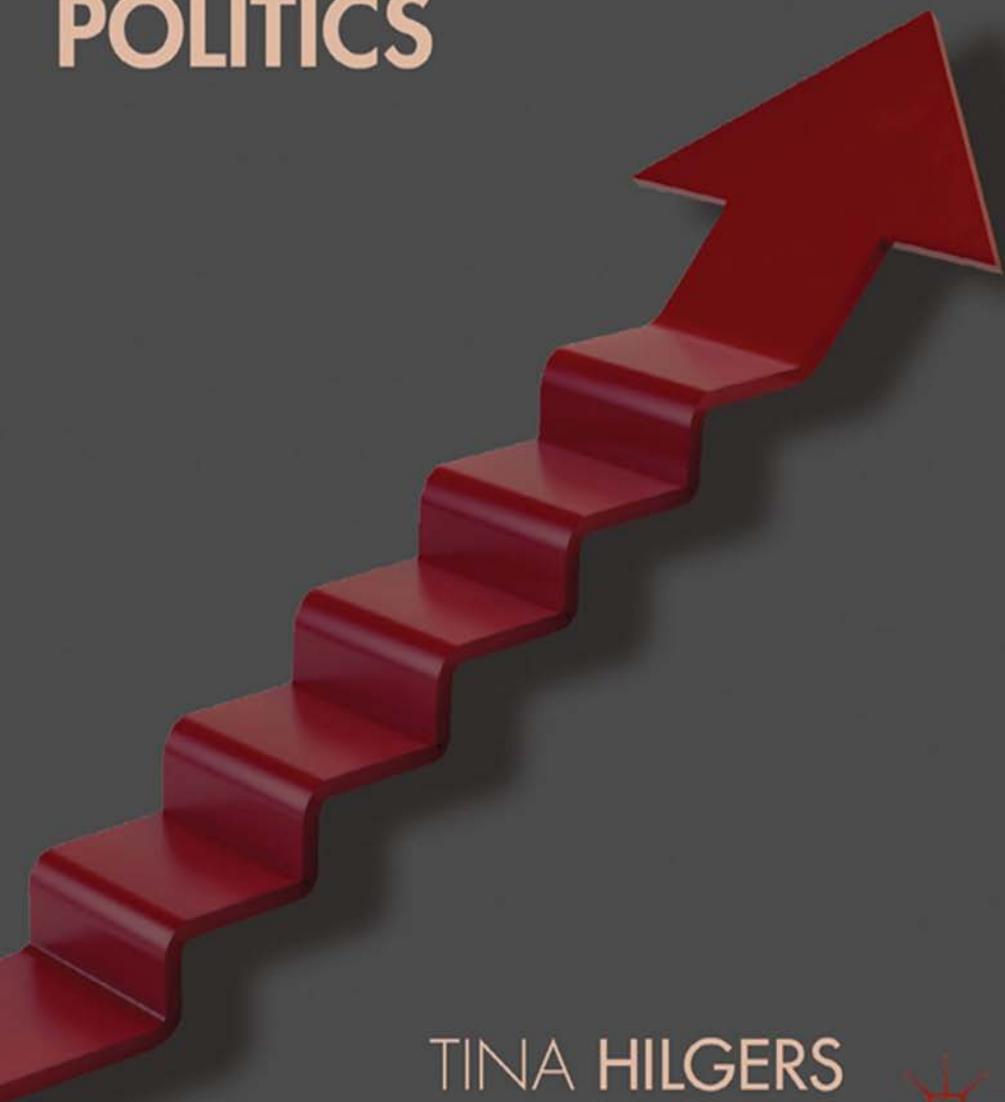


# CLIENTELISM IN EVERYDAY LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS



TINA HILGERS

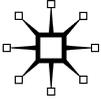


CLIENTELISM IN EVERYDAY LATIN  
AMERICAN POLITICS

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LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

Edited by  
*Tina Hilgers*

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TINA HILGERS  
Montreal, April 28, 2012

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES,  
CLIENTELISTIC RELATIONSHIPS, AND  
THE MATERIAL GOODS PROBLEM

*Tina Hilgers*

The central question in this volume is what is the relationship between clientelism and democracy? The traditional answer to this question has been that clientelism is a vestige of authoritarian regimes that undermines democratic institutions and processes (see the discussion in Roniger 1994b). In the view of the contributors to this volume, the dynamics of clientelism and democracy on the ground are more complex. In third-wave countries with developing economies, the realities of doing politics while coping with markets whose benefits are not broadly accessible are far from the democratic ideals of equality, universality, and participation. Formal democratic rules are implanted in deeply unequal societies, in which the poor are socially and politically marginalized as a result of scarce economic opportunities, and the state is faced with continuous fiscal shortages and real or potential political instability. In the context of uncertainty, actors often prefer the use of personal relationships, such as clientelism, that create predictability, to trusting the doubtful outcome of formal channels.

The contributors to this volume demonstrate that clientelism and democracy are not always opposing poles of the political spectrum, but that they often intermesh in unexpected ways. Archetypal authoritarian elites can use democratic discourse and institutions to reinforce clientelistic networks at the subnational level (chapter 7 by Julián Durazo Herrmann); grassroots contentious collective action may be motivated by clientelism (chapter 4 by Pablo Lapegna and Javier Auyero); drug gangs use both clientelism and democratic processes to protect their positions (chapter 5 by Robert Gay); participatory institutions blur the lines between clientelism and citizenship

(chapter 6 by Françoise Montambeault); citizens use clientelism to fulfill material demands unmet by modern democracy (chapter 3 by Jon Shefner); and citizens learn the skills of democratic participation and cooperation through clientelistic relationships (chapter 8 by Eduardo Canel). In examining clientelism and democracy as overlapping phenomena, the contributors to this volume expose the ways in which clientelism can both undermine and also improve accountability and access to the state, often at the same time.

The clientelism observed in developing democracies today is, thus, clearly not the familiar beast of traditional societies and authoritarian regimes. It is a contextually embedded phenomenon that changes with societal characteristics and regime type. Its dynamics are affected by the development of democratic competition, which increases the client's relative position of power inside the clientelistic relationship by providing him with a choice among patrons. Through its changing forms, clientelism may or may not undermine democracy. The theoretical perspectives, case studies, and regional analyses of Latin America in this volume demonstrate that clientelism can *erode*, *accompany*, and/or *supplement* democratic processes.

An understanding of the mechanisms that actors employ to engage with the state and its policies at the microlevel can inform more effective macro-level policy design. There have been increasing calls for broader analysis of informal politics, following O'Donnell's (1996) statement that politics has been a personal affair for most of history and that only recently and in some areas of the world have formal rules supplanted personalism. The personal rule of Big Men and caciques, clientelism, kinship, and the social networks underpinning informal economies involve well-established and widely practiced rules for interaction. As much as these rules and the networks through which they flow are informal, they are often the key to comprehending political behavior in developing third-wave democracies (O'Donnell 1996; Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Bratton 2007). Armed with evidence of the complex interactions between clientelistic relationships and the rules, agencies, and organizations of the modern democratic state, we hope to improve our understanding of why state policy is often ineffective in the developing world (see Centeno and Portes 2006 for an equivalent argument regarding informal economies).

## POLITICAL IDEALS AND REALITIES

According to Dahl's (1972) classic definition, democracy is a responsive form of government in which citizens express their preferences

and representatives weigh all preferences equally in making policy. This kind of responsiveness is underpinned by the freedoms of expression and association; access to non-state sources of information; the right to vote, to run for office, and to compete for votes and support in free and fair elections; and the dependence of policy on votes and other expressions of preference. Subsequent work emphasized the importance of the rule of law, a professional bureaucracy, and accountability in ensuring the civil society freedoms and activism as well as the state responsiveness stressed by Dahl. Thus, in a democracy, all citizens—including elites—subject themselves to the law, interpreted by an independent judiciary, and an effective and professional state bureaucracy guarantees the rights of citizenship, including the equal treatment of all citizens (Linz and Stepan 1996). Rulers provide information and explanations of their actions to citizens on a regular basis, so that the latter may evaluate leaders' performance and reward or sanction them during, but—importantly—also between, elections. In return, citizens comply with the policies of their leaders, which are made without interference from nonelected actors such as the military, entrenched bureaucrats, and external powers (Schmitter and Karl 1991; for accountability, see also Fox 2007).

To sum up, democracy is built on institutional mechanisms providing a regulatory framework for the operation of the executive, legislature, judiciary, and bureaucracy, as well as for elections, oversight, the circulation of information, the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of citizenship, and so on. The power of institutional arrangements rests on a culture of participation in which citizens take responsibility for expressing preferences, forming and joining associations, gathering information, voting, and holding officials and leaders accountable (Tocqueville 1875; Putnam 1993 and 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Although the ideals of responsiveness, accountability, and participation are elusive even in areas considered to be strong and stable democracies—including the United States and the countries of Northwestern Europe—the reality in developing, third-wave democracies is a particularly poor match for these principles. The third wave began in 1974 and includes transitions to democracy in a number of Latin American, Asian, African, and European countries. In most of these cases, the political game continues to be played based on rules and relationships distinct from those formally expressed in constitutions and other laws, resulting in descriptions using “democracy with adjectives” intended to differentiate empirical cases featuring only some aspects of democracy from core definitions (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Classifying our cases is beyond the scope of this volume, but

in saying that relatively competitive elections are held regularly, with other elements of democracy present in variation, we can call them weak democracies (see Enterline and Greig 2008). Progress in democratic institutions, processes, and behaviors is uneven across and within cases and is not necessarily linear, so that one or a number of the following nondemocratic or antidemocratic practices may occur from time to time—or even regularly—to varying degrees. Notably, the examples of nonideal processes and behaviors also occur in stable, developed democracies, but tend to be much more restricted by the rule of law.

Electoral fraud takes place and incumbents enjoy privileged access to the media and funding sources. Certain sectors of the citizenry—particularly in poor, rural areas—find it more difficult than others to reach polling booths and to have secret ballots. Police, military, and paramilitary forces use brutal measures to contain public opposition. Elected officials privilege private concerns over the public interest and cannot ignore pressures exerted by powerful local or foreign interests. Officials actively undermine efforts to increase transparency. Media routinely critical of entrenched elites at times encounter legal difficulties and individual journalists may be threatened or even killed. Judges can be bought and very progressive ones may even lose their lives. Citizens comply with the policies of their leaders until these are deemed too costly, elites are able to buy decisions in their favor, and the poor are less likely to benefit from due process. Entrenched interests and cultures of kinship, friendship, clientelism, and nepotism undermine bureaucratic professionalism.

The institutional context of the state in such regimes is unclear for many citizens. They cannot trust in the predictable outcome of democratic interactions because the rules for regulating such behavior are not broadly recognized and applied—they are not institutionalized (O'Donnell 1994). Citizens do not know what their position is vis-à-vis the state and its agents, and if they do know the formal rules of the democratic regime, they cannot be sure that these will be employed. The best way of protecting themselves from this uncertainty is often to create a special relationship with a person who has knowledge of, and access to, the state and its resources—a person whose patronage will create through informal means the security that is lacking in the formal system. In Latin America (as in other developing regions) politicians and bureaucracies are often inextricably linked, so that a good relationship with the former implies access to the latter (e.g., Haque 1997; Gingerich 2009; Grindle 2010; [chapter 2](#) by Luis Roniger, this volume).

Clientelism is perhaps the principal informal mechanism used to integrate or co-opt otherwise marginalized sectors of the population—that is, those who are “excluded from meaningful participation” (UNESCO, cited in Jenson 2000, 1n1) in the political arena and the market—into the political systems of the developing world. The core element of clientelism is a long-term relationship of unequal power in which identifiable actors exchange goods and services that often involve political allegiance. Unlike well-functioning democratic redistributive policies and politics, clientelistic benefits are not universally available but are restricted to the supporters of persons with access to resources. In addition, clientelism operates according to a logic of exchange, whereas the ideal of democracy is based on an ethos of citizenship rights.

Clientelism has long historical roots and current applications in both developed and developing areas. The Roman Empire and feudal Europe were built on exchange relationships. The expansion of suffrage in Europe was marked by clientelistic and patronage competition among political parties, and nineteenth-century American cities were run by political machines that used clientelism to co-opt immigrant populations. Wholesale vote-buying through campaign donations and/or threats of political or geographic defection by influential groups and individuals is the hallmark of contemporary political exchange relationships in postindustrial democracies. Precolonial African kingdoms, Indian princedoms, Latin American civilizations, and Southeast Asian kinship networks functioned based on exchanges whereby able leaders convinced followers to accept their authority in return for protection from natural forces or human enemies and for material benefits. Colonizers around the world established patronage links with such leaders, allowing them to subjugate local populations with very little manpower (Nadeau 2002; Newbury 2003; Paul 2008). Postindependence, state leaders unable to penetrate the entirety of their territories with their own agencies or to maintain control of these agencies also used relationships with local leaders to ensure political stability (Migdal 1988). As much as clientelistic arrangements rob the state of a certain amount of power—as strongmen work to shore up their influence by taking over local agencies and party chapters, allocating state resources according to personal criteria—state leaders often prefer them to uncertainty. At the same time, even those state officials who are committed to democratic ideals and rules-based processes in developing areas often find themselves with little choice but to use discretionary targeting of public goods, since resources are too scarce to satisfy the demand of entitled sectors ([chapter 10](#) by Jonathan Fox, this volume).

The contemporary politico-institutional insecurity characterizing many developing democracies is embedded in a context of socioeconomic inequality that deteriorated with the Washington Consensus. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank sponsored neoliberal structural adjustment in many developing countries, including Latin America. Policies to promote privatization, cuts in public spending, and free trade were broadly implemented in the hope of solving the problems of high inflation, insurmountable debt, and public sectors that were expensive, corrupt, and inefficient. Although these policies were successful in controlling inflation and debt, and economic growth resumed, the effects on the masses of lower and lower-middle class citizens were devastating. Socioeconomic inequality and poverty grew, and increasing numbers turned to employment in the informal economy for survival, while the benefits of economic growth were restricted to elites (see, e.g., Ocampo 2004; Fernández-Kelly and Shefner 2006; Panizza 2009; Bateman, Duran Ortiz, and Maclean 2011).

Although the formal rules of democracy are based on equality and universalism, the societies on which these rules are superimposed are deeply unequal. Elites dominate politics and the market, while economic stagnation marginalizes the poor. Scarcity practically bars the poor from formal employment and the (minimal) benefits through social programs that accompany it. Many are able to survive by informally contracting out services, trading, bartering, and negotiating, and using social networks to create a system of community pressure for the fulfillment of economic agreements (Portes and Haller 2005). Economic deficiency and the concomitant lack of education and social contact with politically and economically connected individuals also restrict the poor's access to the state, its agencies, and its resources, diminishing their ability to demand equal treatment and to sanction state leaders for their record on implementing democratic procedures. Some are able to find connected, wealthy, and/or educated patrons with the ability to decode external political and economic processes and protect them from threats (Krishna 2007). Thus, from the perspectives of both state and civil society actors, the predictability of personal relationships such as clientelism may be preferable to the uncertain outcomes of formal rules and in some cases formal processes are simply impracticable.

### VARIETIES OF CLIENTELISM

Despite global similarities in the use of clientelism, the dynamics of particular relationships and systems have been, and continue to be,

contextually embedded. The realization that democratization and new social movements—collective action networks that recurrently oppose entrenched forms of power (Tarrow 2011)—have not transformed societies to the degree once hoped for has resulted in a resurgence of interest in clientelism (see, e.g., Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Schaffer 2007; Leonard et al. 2011; Ong 2012; Szwarcberg 2012; Sadanandan 2012), but the growing literature on the subject is marked by definitional problems related to contextualization. The early phase of research on clientelism, spanning two decades from the 1960s to the early 1980s, involved animated debates on the content, meaning, and impact of clientelistic links (see especially the essays collected in Schmidt et al. 1977, and the detailed definition provided by Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Recent studies are, unfortunately, much more isolationist. Researchers are more engaged in explaining particular cases operating at distinct levels of analysis than in constructing a common understanding of what clientelism is and how it affects society. One recent example is Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) very interesting edited volume that attempts to oppose clientelism to programmatic electoral appeals and to consider the policy impact of both vote-gathering methods. The editors' effort to bring together analyses covering developed and developing countries and regions is laudable. However, the effect is one of a broad introductory definition and individual contributions that agree or disagree with the opening analysis and often fail to engage each other. It seems that scholars have given up on debate, deciding to limit themselves to using clientelism in terms of its local characteristics because the differences in its understanding are too entrenched to be overcome.

Nonetheless, it is clear that an appreciation of the many ways in which clientelism operates and affects society requires understanding its multiple forms. Clientelism is motivated by supply and demand at elected political leadership and civil society levels (Shefter 1994); it functions in the spheres of governance institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2006), at the grassroots (Fernández-Kelly and Shefner 2006; Leonard et al. 2011), and perhaps even at the supranational level (Berman 1974, although this dimension will not be treated in this volume). A conception of the social processes related to clientelism necessitates consideration of its various manifestations—globally, but also regionally and locally (see Hilgers 2008a). One of the goals of this volume is, thus, to engage different perspectives on clientelism with each other, to give readers a comprehensive approach to its dynamics and effects and to draw out convergences across fields, methodologies, and geographic as well as analytical areas of interest.

Researchers tend to agree only that clientelism involves an exchange of goods and services often involving political allegiance. Beyond this characteristic, they use, or refute, a series of other attributes. Clientelism has been variously defined as either *dyadic* or *collective*. In classic studies describing kinship, fictive kinship, and landlord-peasant relations in traditional societies, links were often described as involving two individuals. Here, individual villagers and peasants sought out persons within or outside their families who had access to needed resources and constructed special relationships with them to benefit from their position (Foster 1977 [1961]; Landé 1977 [1973]) and persons of status enhanced their social and political standing by gathering as many individual followers as their resource base could support (Cornelius 1975). Other researchers stressed a collective aspect because they identified as clientelistic the relationships between entire communities and an external political power (Silverman 1977) or between political parties and mass publics (Graziano 1976). Some of the contemporary work defining clientelism as a dyadic link does so to create a broad concept applicable to a series of phenomena including individual and group relationships, with the argument that all of these, at some level, involve interpersonal bargains (Piattoni 2001; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). However, others insist that the collective element is central to an understanding of clientelism because clients form groups with common identities based on class, employment, neighborhood, ethnicity, or other factors and are of interest to patrons because they come in ready-made voting groups (Shefner 2006; Paul 2008).

Another factor of contention has been the relative *power* positions of the parties to clientelistic bargains. Some argue that clientelism is restricted to links between persons of unequal social, economic, and/or political status, in which the patron's position endows him with the balance of power and the ability to direct the relationship (Scott 1977 [1972]), whereas others extend clientelism to cover symmetrical and asymmetrical power relations (Saller 1982). For those who see clientelism as inherently *exploitative*, the imbalance of power is crucial because it describes a context in which the client has little choice but to rely on a patron for protection and resources, and the patron uses his position to politically subjugate and economically profit from the client, sometimes resorting to *coercion* to ensure compliance (Singelmann 1981). At the same time, clientelism is not governed by formal contractual obligations: the relationship is *voluntary* and clients are free to terminate it at any time. This makes violence and exploitation risky for the patron, since it may cause him to lose his

clients, lowering his status and his ability to negotiate in the political hierarchy. For clientelism to function at all, it must be *mutually beneficial* to the parties involved (Roniger 1990). Although some argue that the patron controls the relationship because he holds more valuable resources and that the client gains little from the relationship, others show that it is important to judge value based on context and the relative needs of patron and client (Leonard et al. 2011). As a result, the goods and services exchanged may better be considered *noncomparable* than unequal (Legg 1975).

Clientelism has been defined as either *exclusionary* or *inclusionary*. Since clientelism provides access to resources and the state only to those who have a patron, it excludes others, creating a further level of inequality that divides not only rich from poor, but creates a privileged underclass. However, those who do profit from clientelism are included in the distribution of otherwise unattainable benefits, may be able to use these as a jumping-off point for social mobility and greater integration, and learn democratic skills (see the discussion of neopluralism in Oxhorn 1998; Heredia 2001; [chapter 8](#), Canel, this volume).

Although clientelism involves “perverse accountability”—where voters are responsible to their representatives, rather than the reverse—(Stokes 2005) and inequality, it is not necessarily devoid of *agency* and *rationality* since all members draw benefits that outweigh the bargain’s costs (Shefner 2001 and 2008). The *perceptions of users* often differ quite markedly from those of observers. Although observers criticize the status differential and exclusionary aspects of clientelism (Flynn 1975; see also Auyero 1999b), patrons and clients are contextually bound and see their choices and relationships as reasonable methods for creating order and stability in otherwise unpredictable environments (Hilgers 2009). Certain contemporary studies portray patrons and clients who do not objectively regard their situation as one of exploitation and submission, but construct complex rituals including *friendship*, *affection*, and *obligation* surrounding *diffuse* exchanges where material needs fulfillment is embedded in symbolic, *long-term* relationships that make the harsh reality of poverty more bearable (Güneş-Ayata 1994; Auyero 1999a and 1999b). Such exchanges are undergirded by a *norm of reciprocity*, according to which benefits given must be returned and persons having provided benefits must not be harmed (Gouldner 1977 [1960]). Others argue that these diffuse, norms-based relationships were much more prevalent in traditional societies (Weingrod 1977 [1968]), whereas modern clientelism tends to focus on *short-term*, material transactions, such

as vote-buying or turnout-buying immediately preceding an election, that require *monitoring* to ensure compliance (Schaffer 2007; Wang and Kurzman 2007; Nichter 2008).

Differing perceptions of clientelism are generated both by contextual factors and by levels of analysis. Researchers use Weberian ideal types and a variety of methodological tools for generating concepts applicable to specific cases or to broadly comparable phenomena (see Collier and Mahon 1993 and Gerring 1999 for overviews of such methods). They add or remove definitional characteristics the more or less they focus on, and try to describe particular places and relationships.

Despite their varying perspectives regarding the nature of clientelism, in engaging with each other, the contributors to this volume have found fertile common ground. Whether they consider clientelism to be dyadic or collective, more exploitative or more strategic, whether they study it at the grassroots or in the state, the contributors see transformations in how it is playing out as regimes change. The personalized exchanges at all levels that are considered to be clientelism evolve with contextual rules, degrees of competition, and the actors involved, providing evidence that clientelism is more than a simple remainder of authoritarian regimes or cultures.

## EVALUATING CLIENTELISM AND OTHER SOCIAL EXCHANGE NETWORKS

We know that clientelism is dynamic because it has adapted across the world from traditional to modern societies and changed alongside the characteristics of authoritarian and democratic regimes. In the past, analysts of clientelistic relationships in traditional societies ranging across Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America tended to argue that such links would disappear as society modernized and professionalized state agencies took over the role played by patrons (see, for example, the contributions to Schmidt et al., 1977). However, as modernization began, social scientists observed personalized exchanges similar to those described by the traditional clientelism in processes that linked agricultural villages to central markets, represented villages and urban slums in central politics, and allowed exchanges of information and resources inside increasingly complex political and governmental institutions (Weingrod 1977[1968]; Roniger and Güneş-Ayata 1994). It has also been demonstrated that clientelism is not the same from one authoritarian regime to another. The more authoritarian leaders allow political competition, the more redistributive clientelism