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Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics

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Keywords

clientelism, elections, distributive politics, brokers

Abstract

Research on clientelism often starts from a shared puzzle: How can clientelism be a viable electoral strategy if voters can renege on their commitments to politicians? The standard solution proposed is that politicians resolve this commitment problem with voters through monitoring and enforcement. But there has been startlingly little evidence of individual-level monitoring and enforcement in the recent literature, and many studies now document the use of clientelism even where politicians are aware that the commitment problem remains completely intractable. When read together, recent studies suggest that the focus on resolving the commitment problem is a red herring. Instead, it is increasingly clear that clientelism does not need to be monitored and that the commitment problem does not bind as politicians choose their electoral appeals. New puzzles, motivated by advances in the recent literature, deserve comparatively more attention in future research.

INTRODUCTION

If clientelism is truly a *quid pro quo*—a contingent exchange of particularistic benefits for votes (Hicken 2011)—then politicians (patrons) must ensure that voters (clients) do not renege. Building from the seminal contribution of Stokes (2005), the solution to this commitment problem is often said to require monitoring: To enforce exchanges, politicians are assumed to need some means to assess whether voters have kept up their end of the deal. A long-standing literature shows that monitoring can be straightforward at aggregate levels, facilitating group- and community-level exchanges (Chubb 1982, Chandra 2004, Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007, Medina & Stokes 2007). But individual-level exchanges are also very common even where the individual-level monitoring of vote choices appears to be very hard, even impossible. This creates a puzzle that has motivated numerous studies over the last decade and a half: How can individual-level clientelism be an effective and efficient electoral strategy for politicians if voters' commitments cannot be monitored and enforced?

Some scholars resolve this puzzle by arguing that the monitoring of individual vote choices does in fact occur (Brusco et al. 2004, Stokes 2005, Magaloni 2006), but most have found startlingly little evidence of individual voter monitoring.¹ These scholars resolve the puzzle instead by offering new theoretical explanations for why the particularistic exchanges that they observe still exist without explicit monitoring or enforcement.

In doing so, scholars often take one of two approaches. Some relegate empirical patterns that do not fit the idealized form of clientelism as an explicitly enforced contract for votes to various other categories of nonprogrammable exchange, while still considering the standard definition of clientelism to be more or less intact. Others instead reevaluate some aspect of the traditional model in light of contradictory findings, but do not reject outright the notion that the commitment problem must be solved for clientelism to be a viable strategy. The combined result of these two strands of literature has been a growing morass of new terminology and mounting concern over conceptual stretching (e.g., Nichter 2014). While the studies adopting either approach individually represent significant improvements in our understanding of distributive politics, they collectively suggest that a more significant reevaluation of the field's core focus on the commitment problem is needed.

We attempt to do so in this review. The recent literature demonstrates that the key assumption that solving the commitment problem is necessary for clientelism to become a viable strategy is often misplaced. We start by recognizing that monitoring entails opportunity costs to politicians and that what matters most in the choice of electoral strategies is not a strategy's absolute efficiency and effectiveness but its relative efficiency and effectiveness compared to the plausible alternatives.

A series of conditions make many clientelist transactions at least partly self-enforceable, achieving sufficient contingency without politicians having to pay the potentially large costs of trying to monitor individual voters (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007). Resources that could be devoted to monitoring are better spent elsewhere, and clientelism persists without attempts by politicians to monitor or enforce exchanges with voters directly. In addition, even if clientelism remains very inefficient in an absolute sense, with voters regularly reneging after taking benefits, it may still be relatively more efficient than other possible strategies. This is especially the case where politicians fear suffering a penalty with voters from *not* engaging in clientelism; politicians can find themselves trapped in a Prisoner's Dilemma in which there are significant risks to being the only

¹As described below, our discussion of monitoring in this review focuses specifically on attempts to monitor vote choices, not the monitoring of turnout (e.g., Nichter 2008) or the theoretically distinct issue of how politicians monitor brokers' performance (e.g., Larreguy et al. 2016, Hicken et al. 2019).

competitor to deviate from the prevailing clientelist equilibrium. Where clientelism has high exit costs, it can persist even if the commitment problem remains completely unresolved.

If we update our baseline assumptions to reflect these recent contributions, the main motivating puzzle stops being so puzzling. Clientelism does not need to be monitored, and the commitment problem does not bind. We do not dispute that monitoring individual vote choices can be an important part of clientelism in some contexts. But scholars have now documented a broad set of conditions under which clientelism is still used even if commitments between politicians and voters are only very imperfect, and, in some cases, even if politicians are fully aware that they cannot solve the commitment problem at all. Overall, the ability to monitor does not appear to be a limiting or even particularly salient factor in politicians' choices.

Motivated by these advances in the recent literature, we identify a series of different, as yet unresolved areas for future research on clientelism. To more fully theorize politicians' decisions to use clientelism, we need to better understand the costs and benefits of the alternatives—the nonclientelist strategies politicians are choosing against—and we need to more carefully investigate the role of bottom-up voter pressure in forcing politicians into clientelist exchanges that may appear very inefficient. Moreover, we need to better explain the central role that brokers still play in clientelist exchanges even in cases where monitoring voters is clearly not their main role. Ultimately, a continued focus on the commitment problem, particularly the search for evidence of monitoring, risks becoming a red herring—diverting scholarly attention and resources away from still open questions in order to grapple with what amounts to a nonpuzzle and nonessential feature of electoral clientelism.

DEFINITIONS: “REAL” CLIENTELISM VERSUS NOT-QUITE CLIENTELISM

Under standard definitions, clientelism “represents a transaction” (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007, p. 2), or *quid pro quo*, in which particularistic benefits from political patrons are reciprocated by voters (the clients). While clientelism has never been very consistently defined (Hilgers 2011), Hicken (2011) highlights the main elements shared across most definitions. Two elements—contingency and iteration—are central to almost all conceptualizations.

Clientelist exchanges are said to be contingent in that voters expect to receive benefits only if they respond with the patron's desired political behavior. Contingency implies that clientelism has a fundamental commitment problem. Because the exchange is not simultaneous, voters have an opportunity to go back on their commitment after receiving benefits. Moreover, if a reward is promised after the vote is cast, politicians have an opportunity to break their promise (Robinson & Verdier 2013, Nichter 2018). Iteration—mutual expectations that exchanges will continue into the future—is said to be necessary to solve this commitment problem by discouraging defection (Stokes 2005).

Various subtypes of clientelism fit within this definition. Contingent, iterated exchanges may seek to persuade (buy votes), mobilize (buy turnout), or both (Gans-Morse et al. 2014). These exchanges may be concentrated temporally around campaigns or continue long after elections are over (Nichter 2018). Exchanges may represent direct, individual-level transactions between clients and a patron or be mediated by that patron's agents, or brokers (Mares & Young 2016). Finally, clientelist exchanges may involve the distribution of excludable private goods to individual recipients, or the targeting of club goods to communities or other narrow sets of recipients (Cammatt & Issar 2010).

But the field has struggled to label exchanges that look a lot like clientelism but do not quite fit. Scholars regularly observe politicians and parties distributing targeted benefits to voters in a

fashion that, on the surface, appears to be plainly clientelist. Yet something is amiss: Exchanges appear to be only very imperfectly contingent, with gaping opportunities for defection; or exchanges are clearly not iterated, with no reason the transaction should be expected to continue (Aspinall & Sukmajati 2016, Kramon 2017, Hicken et al. 2019).

Many scholars place these clientelism-adjacent practices in various residual categories of non-programmatic politics (Stokes et al. 2013, p. 7). The result is a growing list of terms—themselves often defined inconsistently across studies—used to characterize deviations from “real” clientelism. Distinguishing clientelism from pork, patronage, favoritism, partisan bias, persuasion buying, reputation building, and so on is becoming a challenging mental exercise.

One step forward for the field would be to intensify efforts to better define these other types of exchange. Indeed, our analysis below suggests that common usage of the word clientelism now extends significantly beyond the concept’s standard definition (e.g., Hicken 2011, Stokes et al. 2013). Lacking agreed-upon terminology to label clientelism-adjacent exchanges, many scholars simply default back to the term clientelism even as they document practices that do not really fit. These deviations are now so common, in fact, that “real” clientelism—with a clearly contingent, iterated *quid pro quo*—appears to be substantially rarer across the world than the size of the literature on clientelism implies.

However, there are also limits to insisting that many of the particularistic exchanges that scholars observe are theoretically distinct from real clientelism. This risks missing insights that can be drawn from the broad commonalities shared across these exchanges. More practically, any attempt to draw a clear dividing line between “real” clientelism and “not-quite” clientelism will be arbitrary. Very few recent studies, if any, document full contingency, with the commitment problem perfectly resolved and no chance for defection by voters. Instead, the practices that political scientists label as clientelism can be arrayed on a continuous spectrum from more to less contingent. It is not clear what should count as contingent enough to get defined as “real.”

Rather than trying to parse out these fine-grained distinctions and introduce yet more terminology, we believe a more productive approach for this review is to examine what can be learned with a more holistic view, taking scholars at their word and considering together all of the non-programmatic strategies they choose to label as clientelism. When seen as variations along the same continuum, the widespread existence of exchanges that look a lot like clientelism, but do not quite fit standard definitions, suggests that it may be time for a more thorough reconsideration of standard assumptions.

THE PUZZLE: PERVASIVE “CLIENTELISM,” BUT LITTLE MONITORING OR ENFORCEMENT

The standard solution to the commitment problem proposed in classic literature on clientelism is that politicians monitor voters to verify that they reciprocate, and then use information gleaned from monitoring to enforce the transaction by punishing those who renege, or further rewarding those who comply. This standard model assumes that the *quid pro quo* falls apart absent monitoring and enforcement. At worst, clientelism becomes completely ineffective. At best, it is highly inefficient, with politicians receiving a very low rate of return on their invested resources and effort.

To be sure, some studies do provide clear-cut evidence of monitoring through violations of the secret ballot. This is documented most often in historical cases prior to the adoption of the Australian ballot, such as in nineteenth-century Germany (Mares 2015) and the United States (Aidt & Jensen 2017, Kuo & Teorell 2017) or in early-twentieth-century Chile (Baland & Robinson

Table 1 Claims and evidence in research on clientelism, 2008–2018 publications ($n = 82$)^a

Primary level of exchange	Clientelism's purpose	Type of transaction	Assumes individual-level monitoring is needed	Evidence of monitoring of individual vote choices	Evidence of enforcement over individual vote choices
Individual voters: 78 (95%)	Persuasion: 24 (33%)	Iterated (ongoing): 37 (45%)	Yes: 31 (38%)	Yes, modern period: 5 (6%)	Yes: 11 (13%)
Groups of voters: 4 (5%)	Mobilization: 7 (9%)	Single-shot (spot): 22 (27%)	Turnout only: 4 (5%)	Yes, historically only: 6 (7%)	No: 67 (82%)
	Both goals: 31 (38%)	Mixed: 12 (15%)	No: 34 (41%)	No: 67 (82%)	Not empirical paper: 4 (5%)
	No claim: 17 (21%)	No claim: 11 (13%)	No claim: 13 (16%)	Not empirical paper: 4 (5%)	

^aAuthors' coding of 73 journal articles and 9 books published in 2008–2018 on the operation of clientelism in the developing world.

2008). Monitoring is also famously said to occur in contemporary Argentina, where parties can track the preprinted ballot papers that voters bring to the polls (Brusco et al. 2004).²

Overall, however, systematic evidence of the monitoring of vote choices is surprisingly rare. We reach this conclusion after attempting to identify and review the universe of recent research examining how clientelism operates that has been published in major political science, economics, and area studies journals.³ We restrict our review to research published from 2008 to 2018, to focus on the body of scholarship that emerged after the major contributions of Stokes (2005) and Kitschelt & Wilkinson (2007). We focus solely on studies that make direct claims about the actual mechanics of clientelist exchange. Rather than relitigate the definitions of clientelism used by each study, we defer to authors' own classifications, including any studies in which the authors label the phenomenon they are studying as clientelism. In doing so, we exclude studies in which clientelism is discussed but is not the main phenomenon being examined, as well as studies applying the concept to nonelectoral domains, such as legislative bargaining. This selection process yields 73 articles across 24 journals.⁴ We also include 9 major books from the post-2008 period that cover similar material. As a group, these studies draw on data and cases from all regions of the world and employ a variety of research methods.

Of these 82 studies, we were curious to see how many still start from the theoretical assumption that monitoring of individual vote choices is central to making clientelism work (Stokes 2005). By our count, 38% (31 studies) make this assumption (see **Table 1**). Another 5% assume that

²Even in Argentina, however, there is debate about how much monitoring of this type actually occurs (see Zarazaga 2014).

³We do not include working papers.

⁴We have attempted to make this list as comprehensive as possible by searching first through the full set of published studies in all major political science journals. We then supplement our focused search with a broader Google Scholar search for terms related to clientelism in order to identify studies in other disciplines. We recognize that we could have missed some studies, especially in less prominent journals. The studies in our data come from *African Affairs* (2), *American Economic Review* (1), *American Journal of Political Science* (12), *American Political Science Review* (5), *Asian Politics and Policy* (2), *Asian Survey* (1), *British Journal of Political Science* (3), *Comparative Political Studies* (12), *Comparative Politics* (5), *Democratization* (4), *Econometrica* (1), *Economic Journal* (1), *Economics and Politics* (1), *Electoral Studies* (5), *Europe-Asia Studies* (1), *Journal of Modern African Studies* (2), *Journal of Politics* (2), *Journal of Theoretical Politics* (2), *Latin American Politics and Society* (1), *Latin American Research Review* (1), *Perspectives on Politics* (1), *Philippine Political Science Journal* (1), *South East Asia Research* (1), and *World Politics* (5).

monitoring is needed, but only in terms of turnout. However, a majority of the studies (57%) either make no claim about the role of monitoring (16%) or reject the monitoring assumption altogether (41%), indicative of the recent shifts in the literature that we summarize in this review.

Note that there is nearly an even split between studies that assume monitoring is needed and those that reject that assumption. However, these two sets of studies do mostly share one thing in common—a belief that the secret ballot usually makes the direct monitoring of individual vote choices impractical. For studies in the no-monitoring group, the focus of research has now shifted to other aspects of the exchange. But among studies that still see monitoring as an essential feature, there is an assumption that politicians must still be able to monitor vote choice in some other way. Without the ability to directly observe voters' behavior, politicians are often instead said to monitor vote choices indirectly or holistically through their social relationships with voters, often facilitated by employing brokers who are socially embedded in voter networks (Brusco et al. 2004, Magaloni 2006).

But this type of holistic monitoring ability is usually asserted to exist without being demonstrated empirically. In fact, **Table 1** shows that only 11 (13%) recent studies provide any concrete evidence of politicians being able to monitor individual vote choices, whether directly or indirectly. Of those 11, 6 offer evidence from historical cases in which the vote was not yet secret (e.g., Mares 2015). Only 4 studies present systematic evidence of monitoring of vote choices in modern cases. Interestingly, these 4 studies have something in common—each documents monitoring in autocratic or quasi-autocratic elections, namely in Russia, Lebanon, and Yemen (Frye et al. 2014, 2019; Corstange 2016, 2018). A fifth study cites direct qualitative evidence that monitoring of vote choices occurs in “a few localities” in Hungary, but the authors note that monitoring is not widespread and find that 96% of voters believe their votes are secret (Mares & Young 2018, p. 11). We could find not a single recent study with evidence of widespread monitoring of individual vote choices in a modern democracy.

What should we infer from the fact that scholars have found very little evidence of voter monitoring? One possibility is that we are looking for evidence in the wrong place. Even if politicians cannot monitor vote choices at the individual level because of the secret ballot, perhaps they can do so at the community level using local election results (Gingerich & Medina 2013, Rueda 2016). Communal monitoring may facilitate community-level clientelist exchanges (Gottlieb & Larreguy 2016, Nathan 2016), but **Table 1** demonstrates that almost all recent studies (95%) focus on individual-level exchanges. Yet we cannot completely dismiss this as a potential explanation, and we discuss the possibility of collective monitoring further below.

Another possibility is that we are misinterpreting clientelist exchange as an attempt at vote buying when it is really turnout buying. If the goal of clientelism is purely to mobilize core supporters, rather than change anyone's vote, then the monitoring task is much easier (Nichter 2008). Candidates only need to monitor whether someone turns out, which is often publicly observable (e.g., Szwarcberg 2015, Larreguy et al. 2016). However, over the last decade, only 9% of studies have argued that clientelism is primarily or solely about mobilizing political participation. Over two-thirds of the reviewed research argues instead that persuasion was either the primary (33%) or partial (38%) purpose of clientelist exchange.

A reasonable reader might respond that the absence of evidence of monitoring is not evidence of absence. This absence might simply reflect the fact that detecting monitoring is particularly challenging given its sensitivity and potential illegality. But this seems implausible to us. The studies under review provide ample evidence of targeted electoral handouts to individuals, even though such handouts are also sensitive and often illegal. Voters report receiving such handouts in surveys, and politicians and brokers openly describe the process and machinery connected with clientelism. It is unlikely that these same respondents, who readily offer reports of clientelism,

would be reticent about associated monitoring if it was truly such an essential part of the exchange. To the contrary, candidates and their brokers often speak quite openly about their desire to monitor voters while bemoaning their inability to do so (e.g., Hicken et al. 2019, Nathan 2019). So, in short, while it is possible to explain away the fact that we have very little evidence of monitoring, an even simpler explanation must be taken seriously: Systematic monitoring is rarely observed because it rarely happens.

Another empirical roadblock relates to enforcement. Once vote choices are identified through monitoring, politicians are assumed to enforce clientelist exchanges in some way, usually by cutting defectors off from future benefits. Most claims about enforcement thus assume that exchanges occur as part of an iterated, multi-round relationship (Stokes 2005), or as part of what Nichter (2018) terms relational clientelism, in which politicians and voters engage in sustained exchanges over time. But a sizable minority of the exchanges labeled clientelism in existing literature are not iterated. This is especially true for the distribution of cash and other small benefits during campaigns. **Table 1** shows that 27% of recent studies describe single-shot spot transactions in which politicians distribute benefits to voters with whom they are not in ongoing relationships and whom they may not even be able to identify again in the future. Another 15% describe a mix of iterated and spot transactions. Thus, in many contexts, clear opportunities to punish defectors do not exist, even if vote choices could be monitored perfectly. In addition, even where relationships are ongoing, our review of the literature reveals very little evidence of enforcement. Only 13% of the studies we reviewed contain any clear evidence of attempts at enforcement (e.g., withdrawing benefits) targeted at individual voters believed to have reneged, and most of that evidence is anecdotal.

This lack of evidence informs the puzzle that motivates a large body of recent research: How could clientelism—or at least something that looks a lot like clientelism—continue to be a viable strategy if the commitment problem renders exchanges severely inefficient in the absence of monitoring and enforcement?

EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE RELATIVE TO WHAT?

The consistent answer offered by much of the more recent literature is that the commitment problem does not bind. Clientelism is regularly used even where commitments are only imperfectly enforced, or not enforced at all. Many of the nonprogrammatic appeals used by politicians are clearly inefficient in an absolute sense, with some benefits going to voters who do not reciprocate with support. However, the absolute efficiency of such an appeal is not enough to explain whether clientelism is a viable electoral strategy. We also need to know whether it is a more or less efficient use of politicians' scarce resources and effort than the other strategies that could be pursued instead.

The puzzle motivating much of the recent literature is not nearly as puzzling if we stop viewing the efficiency and effectiveness of clientelism in a theoretical vacuum and instead consider efficiency and effectiveness relative to the realistic alternatives. In this section, we first compare clientelism to other strategies for persuading and mobilizing voters. We then look specifically at the costs and returns to monitoring vis-à-vis other alternatives.

Very little existing research directly evaluates the efficiency of exchanges labeled clientelism relative to other electoral appeals or forms of distribution. Intuitively, though, it is clear that there can be cases in which the returns from a very weakly enforced clientelist exchange could still be higher than those from an alternative strategy—even as some recipients defect with impunity. We can conceptualize any strategy politicians may adopt as having some yield rate: a conversion of resources and effort expended into votes received. Contingency is not absolute, and the commitment problem is not binary (i.e., solved or unsolved). Instead, a politician's possible strategies can be arrayed along a spectrum by their yield rate.

Crucially, most nonclientelist appeals are also inefficient, with low yields. For example, switching to fully programmatic distribution might be even more wasteful than unenforced, but targeted, clientelism if it means that more scarce resources now flow to core supporters of an opposing party that will definitely not reciprocate with support (Cox & McCubbins 1986). Similarly, yield rates on campaign messaging through the media or rallies might be tiny.

We must also factor the costs of abstaining from clientelism into our consideration of these comparative yield rates. This calculation hinges on how politicians believe voters will behave if they do not receive targeted benefits. As we explore in more detail in the next section, despite the fact that voter targeting is inefficient, it may still be a viable strategy where politicians believe that (a) even the support of core supporters is contingent, and/or (b) most voters have grown to expect handouts and will punish politicians who do not provide them. Where politicians hold these beliefs, unmonitored and unenforced exchanges may still be employed, despite widespread awareness of the commitment problem, because the costs of exiting from clientelism exceed the benefits.

Finally, as politicians weigh these comparisons, they must also consider the costs of attempting to solve the commitment problem through monitoring. Monitoring clearly improves the yield rate of clientelism, but investing in monitoring entails opportunity costs. The effort or resources that politicians put toward trying to observe or infer individual vote choices could also be invested elsewhere: targeting more voters, providing more valuable benefits, funding other types of campaign appeals, and so on. Moreover, aggressively monitoring one set of voters may raise the visibility of clientelism and spark a costly backlash among other voters who disapprove of it as a corrupt electoral practice (Weitz-Shapiro 2014). It may also engender resentment from the voters who are being monitored and the brokers who are forced to do the monitoring. This implies that many politicians may choose to forgo intensive efforts to monitor voters if they can achieve the same or better returns on their investment of resources elsewhere.

A stripped-down example can illustrate the point more formally. Consider a politician who, in the absence of monitoring, expects the targeting of individual voters to produce a yield rate of 25% (i.e., 25% of recipients reciprocate with their votes).⁵ Assuming a constant budget constraint B and holding the size of handouts per voter constant, if the politician wants to mobilize N votes, she faces a trade-off. She can target benefits to $T = N * 4$ voters without monitoring, or she can target fewer voters ($T^M < T$) and, instead, engage in some amount $M > 0$ of monitoring in hopes of raising her yield rate.

Which strategy she pursues will depend on her beliefs about the cost of producing the needed number of voters via giving out more handouts versus via increased monitoring. If $Y^M \in [0, 1]$ equals the expected yield rate from distributing benefits to individual voters at level of monitoring M , then the candidate will choose to monitor ($M > 0$) only if the expected yield for that level of monitoring and number of targeted voters ($Y^M * T^M$) is greater than the expected yield if there is no investment in monitoring ($Y^0 * T$) (Equation 1). Equation 2 demonstrates that the number of voters that the candidate can target under monitoring (T^M) is a function of the size of the budget (B) minus the cost of the level of monitoring the candidate chooses (C^M), with $C^M > 0$ and C^M and Y^M both increasing in M . In order for monitoring to be an appealing strategy, the increase in the expected number of votes obtained by boosting the yield rate must be large enough to offset the votes lost from being able to afford to target fewer voters. If the cost of monitoring is sufficiently high, or if the possible improvement to the yield rate from monitoring is small, the candidate will choose to forgo monitoring ($M = 0$) in favor of targeting more voters, even at the cost of a lower

⁵This is the estimated yield rate for such targeting in Indonesia according to Hicken et al. (2019).

overall yield rate.

$$Y^0 * T < Y^M * T^M \quad 1.$$

$$T^M = B - C^M \quad 2.$$

We know that the cost of monitoring varies across empirical settings and types of exchanges. In some contexts, monitoring vote choice is cheap and easy. Prior to the advent of the secret ballot, votes were directly observable (Aidt & Jensen 2017). Even where there is nominal ballot secrecy, influence over electoral administration sometimes allows political elites to easily subvert it. Mares (2015), for example, documents how nineteenth-century German employers overcame ballot secrecy by using their agents to staff polling places; Baland & Robinson (2008) describe ballot secrecy violations by landlords in early-twentieth-century Chile; Frye et al. (2019) explore related manipulations of ballot secrecy in contemporary Russia. Moreover, if the goal is purely mobilization of known supporters, not persuasion, monitoring is simpler.

However, according to the literature we reviewed above, these are the exceptions, not the rule. Most exchanges center on vote choice, not turnout. With the secret ballot now widespread across the developing world, monitoring is thought to require assembling armies of grassroots agents, or brokers, to penetrate voter social networks and infer vote choices through personal interactions (Brusco et al. 2004, Stokes 2005). The cost of amassing such a network can be huge. In addition to simply sending agents out to distribute handouts or deploying them to the polls on election day, each of which is already costly, parties and politicians must also find a way to motivate a large grassroots workforce long past election day, while also investing in strategies to monitor those brokers in order to prevent shirking. Engaging brokers is not cheap—they can extract substantial rents from politicians in return for their work (Stokes et al. 2013, Aspinall & Sukmajati 2016, Camp 2017, Novaes 2018).

Yet even if brokers are properly motivated, they still may not be particularly good at monitoring vote choices. In one of the first systematic tests of brokers' actual monitoring ability, Schneider (2019) quizzes local clientelist agents in India about voters in their communities and finds that they are so bad at inferring how community members vote, especially among swing voters, that they would have been as effective if guessing at random. Using a related test, Brierley & Nathan (2019) show that the typical clientelist broker in Ghana cannot even identify a quarter of registered voters at their own polling station by name, and lacks substantive social relationships with them that could be used to infer vote choices.⁶ Collectively, these studies suggest that employing grassroots agents to personally interact with voters still yields, at best, only very imperfect monitoring. As a result, even at the maximum expenditure on brokers, most clientelist exchanges will probably still be inefficient, with some recipients able to defect undetected, and a yield rate (Y^M) far less than 1 (100%).

Moreover, in some settings where clientelism is documented, the most common networks of grassroots agents that could monitor voters do not exist. Van de Walle (2007), Kramon (2017), and Hicken et al. (2019) argue that in some African and Southeast Asian countries, for example, even imperfect forms of monitoring are largely off the table because political parties are so weak and unstable, lacking strong local organizations. A politician in such a setting, who has a short electoral time horizon and who lacks the financial resources to build up her own machine quickly from scratch, may face a prohibitive monitoring cost—one that exceeds her budget ($C^M > B$, for any $M > 0$).

⁶By contrast, Ravanilla et al. (2018) find that brokers in the Philippines are better at identifying voters and inferring vote choices.

WHEN DO POLITICIANS DO WITHOUT MONITORING OR ENFORCED COMMITMENTS?

Recent studies have explained the continued use of clientelism despite the lack of monitoring in two main ways. The first set of explanations identifies alternative solutions to the commitment problem that allow politicians to forego the costs of monitoring. While these other solutions are all imperfect, producing yield rates well below 100%, they can still be sufficiently effective (i.e., Y^0 is still high enough) to make clientelism a worthwhile bet relative to other electoral strategies. The second set of studies instead details conditions under which politicians who face prohibitively high monitoring costs will willingly ignore the commitment problem altogether and use clientelism even though they know that all exchanges are nonbinding and that their yield rates will be very low.

Imperfectly Solving the Commitment Problem Without Monitoring

The first set of studies demonstrates that many politicians regularly proceed with clientelism without any need for individual-level monitoring by relying on alternative means of sufficiently, albeit imperfectly, addressing the commitment problem. Four alternative solutions have been identified: scaring voters into believing the ballot is not secret, distributing revocable benefits that align clients' and patrons' incentives, relying on pre-existing social norms and obligations, or engaging in collective monitoring.

Voters believe their vote is monitored. Voters behave as if their vote is monitored if they sincerely believe that it is—even if that belief is false (Corstange 2016). For example, Cruz (2015, 2019) and Ferree & Long (2016) show that politicians' efforts to stoke fears around ballot secrecy lead subsets of voters in the Philippines and Ghana, respectively, to incorrectly believe that their votes are being monitored, and to comply with clientelist transactions accordingly. This may only work among particularly low-information and vulnerable voters who already have serious doubts about election integrity. But at least for this subset, using intimidation to manipulate perceived ballot secrecy may be much cheaper than actually monitoring votes.

Voters' interests are aligned with the party's. The nature of the goods provided to voters can make clientelism self-enforcing by aligning recipients' interests with the electoral success of the party providing the benefits (Gallego 2015). This is most likely for the subset of exchanges that are iterated, involving benefits that (a) have ongoing payoffs and (b) may cease if another party wins.

Prominent examples of this dynamic involve the provision of land (Magaloni 2006, Boone 2011, Albertus 2012, Albertus et al. 2016). Land reform in developing countries often results in a "titling gap"—governments provide valuable plots to peasants but do not give them full property rights, such as legal title or the ability to sublet or borrow against their new asset (Albertus et al. 2018). Without secure title, recipients may fear that a new government will seize back their land and redistribute it to others, as Boone (2011) documents for Kenya. Moreover, land recipients often become dependent on the government for ongoing access to farm inputs, and they fear that they will lose their livelihood should a new government cut them off from this stream of benefits (Albertus et al. 2016, 2018). Dependency effectively aligns incentives: Recipients see it in their private interest to vote for the ruling party, regardless of whether their behavior is monitored, because they now want it to win.

A similar logic can apply to public sector jobs. Because recipients of patronage jobs often expect that a new party will fire them and refill their positions with its own clients, providing jobs can

create self-enforcing transactions even where votes are secret. Mares & Young (2018) show that politicians in Hungary intentionally play up perceptions of aligned interests by warning copartisan beneficiaries of job programs that they will lose their jobs should a new party win.

Relatedly, Nichter (2018) argues that voters can help make exchanges self-enforcing by making costly public displays of their partisanship before elections. Voters and politicians both expect that voters who are easily identifiable as core supporters of one party will be excluded from most benefits by the other party. This common knowledge aligns incentives: Identifiable partisans want their party to win so that they can continue accessing benefits; in turn, the party knows that these voters have little incentive to defect and does not need to expend effort monitoring whether they comply or renege.⁷

Voters comply with social norms. Strong norms or social obligations may lead some voters to comply with exchanges even in the absence of monitoring. Finan & Schechter (2012) find that survey respondents in Paraguay who demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic reciprocity are more likely to be targeted by brokers with vote-buying offers in the expectation that they are more likely to comply voluntarily. Lawson & Greene (2014) similarly argue that clients' feelings of social obligation to brokers can be sufficient to sustain the *quid pro quo*. Ravanilla et al. (2018) and Cruz (2019) both show that brokers in the Philippines target vote-buying offers based on voters' locations within local social networks in order to take advantage of social pressure from peers that induces recipients to reciprocate on behalf of their social group. These norms and forms of social pressure likely exist in only some cultural contexts and may affect only some voters, but where they are strong, politicians need not pay the costs of monitoring.

Voters' reciprocation is monitored collectively. It may also be possible to sufficiently enforce individual-level exchanges through aggregate election results alone. Where results are publicly reported at fine-grained resolutions, such as for individual polling stations, politicians may still be able to reasonably infer the approximate share of clientelist exchanges that were reciprocated even without investing any resources in tracking individual voters (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007, Medina & Stokes 2007, Gingerich & Medina 2013). Rueda (2015, 2016) argues that where electoral units are sufficiently small, public results provide sufficient information for parties to deduce whether most recipients of benefits have complied with the *quid pro quo*. Exchanges can then be enforced through collective punishment. Indeed, threats of collective enforcement are what appear to activate the social pressure observed by Cruz (2019), with community members pushing each other to comply so that they all can continue to receive benefits in the future. In line with this logic, Rueda (2016) finds that more vote buying occurs in smaller polling stations in Colombia, where aggregate results send a clearer signal about recipients' rates of compliance.⁸

Ignoring the Commitment Problem Altogether

Even in cases where none of these alternative solutions to the commitment problem are possible, monitoring may still not be necessary. A second set of studies identifies conditions under which politicians will continue with clientelism—or at least a set of targeted, particularistic exchanges that appear similar to clientelism—even when the commitment problem is known in advance to

⁷This dynamic may also extend to contexts where partisanship is closely proxied by observable social characteristics such as ethnicity (Posner 2005, Padro i Miquel 2007, Nathan 2019).

⁸A related literature explores the implications of this form of collective monitoring for party leaders' ability to monitor the performance of brokers (Larreguy et al. 2016, Gottlieb & Larreguy 2016).

be entirely unresolved. From recent literature, we detail two explanations—credibility buying and turf protection—for why politicians might ignore the commitment problem outright.

Credibility buying. As discussed above, some of what gets labeled clientelism may really be a form of “credibility buying,” as politicians feel they must pay some minimum price to be viewed as viable candidates by voters. Politicians in Kenya (Kramon 2017), Peru (Muñoz 2014), and Indonesia (Hicken et al. 2019) widely distribute pre-election handouts in a manner that looks on the surface like Stokes’s (2005) vote buying but lacks any presumption of monitoring and enforcement (see also Muhtadi 2019). Such handouts are a means to gain voters’ attention or to signal voters about politicians’ credibility and commitment to distributing more benefits in the future (Muñoz 2014, Kramon 2017, Hicken et al. 2019). Using a survey experiment, Kramon (2017) finds that Kenyan voters are less likely to support politicians who fail to provide campaign handouts, and they also evaluate these politicians’ reputations and credibility more negatively. In a related line of thinking, Schaffer & Baker (2015) suggest that even where an enforced exchange is impossible, politicians may distribute targeted benefits to drum up positive conversations among voters about their reputations.

Chauchard (2018) frames similar behavior in India as a Prisoner’s Dilemma. If voters have grown to expect politicians to provide targeted benefits, and politicians believe that most of their opponents engage in this behavior, then politicians may be trapped by fear of being the only competitor to deviate. In equilibrium, clientelist handouts might have no observable impact on vote choice at all (Guardado & Wantchekon 2018), and all politicians would be better off if they did not expend scarce resources on unenforceable exchanges from which they know many recipients will defect. But not providing benefits when everyone else still does risks voter backlash—the nonclientelist politician appears comparatively stingy and signals to voters that he is both unlikely to win and unlikely to be a credible patron (Muhtadi 2019).

Politicians and brokers in Ghana sometimes justify their own use of clientelism in this fashion. For example, immediately after complaining that he had no means to monitor recipients or enforce vote-buying transactions, a party broker explained why the politician he works for still distributes handouts: If he does not, “they’ll go and say ‘Oh, that man is a bad man!’ . . . So that makes the politicians think they must bribe the people with money. If they don’t give out, they won’t vote for you” (quoted in Nathan 2019, pp. 183–84). Similarly, a broker in Indonesia declared, “If you don’t have money [for handouts] you can’t stand” (Hicken et al. 2019). In these examples, clientelism is used not because these brokers think it creates real commitments, but because they fear the reputational penalty associated with *not* engaging in it.

Turf protection. Politicians may also use clientelism as a form of “turf protection” (Hicken et al. 2019) aimed at keeping existing supporters from abandoning them—even without any expectation that it creates direct commitments. Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2016) argue that partisanship in developing countries is often endogenous to voters’ expectations about clientelism: A party’s core supporters are those who expect to benefit most from its largesse.⁹ Where core voters hold these beliefs, they may proactively demand benefits from politicians to which they believe they are entitled. Nichter & Peress (2017) and Lindberg (2003, 2010) detail how voters often seek out brokers and politicians to initiate clientelist exchanges on their own.

Implicit in voters’ bottom-up requests is a threat to withhold support if their demands are not met. This creates an inverted form of the standard *quid pro quo* in which voters, not

⁹Theories of instrumental ethnic voting make identical claims about ethnicity (Posner 2005, Ferree 2011, Ichino & Nathan 2013).

politicians, monitor and enforce the exchanges. This forces politicians to deliver clientelist benefits to core supporters for fear of losing them (Nichter & Peress 2017). Even without monitoring, Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2016, p. 80) argue that many parties favor core supporters in clientelism because they expect these voters to stop being core supporters absent an ongoing flow of benefits. For politicians, the alternative—watching their core base of support slip away—can be even worse than engaging in very inefficient exchanges.

For example, politicians and brokers in Ghana explicitly justify their use of clientelism in similar terms. One broker explained his provision of benefits to a group of party supporters by calling it a “blackmail situation”: Presented with specific demands for patronage and a threat of defection to the other party, the broker felt he had no choice but to comply (Nathan 2019, p. 189). In the broker’s reasoning, clientelism was not a strategy he employed because it would create new enforceable commitments and secure definite support, but one he needed to use because otherwise these voters would leave his party.

When Does Monitoring Still Matter?

These two sets of studies do not imply that monitoring never happens or that it cannot be an important feature of clientelism in some cases. But reviewing this literature demonstrates that the ability to monitor individual voters may be a necessary condition for the use of clientelism in only a very narrow set of situations. Where monitoring costs are very low—because the ballot is not secret or because parties have such substantial organizational or coercive capacity that overcoming ballot secrecy is straightforward—many exchanges may still be monitored, as politicians prefer to raise their yield rate. However, the typical politician engaging in clientelism usually does not face such low monitoring costs. Where monitoring costs are higher, monitoring may be crucial to the decision to use clientelism only if (a) all of the alternative solutions to the commitment problem discussed above are not available and (b) politicians do not face strong pressure for credibility buying or turf protection. We believe that these restrictions rule out a broad swath of situations in which clientelism is commonly observed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If we accept that monitoring is often unnecessary and the commitment problem does not need to be resolved, it is probably time to stop concentrating so much research effort on searching for evidence of monitored and enforced commitments. Instead, our discussion suggests several promising directions for future research. We highlight four.

What Are the Realistic Alternatives to Clientelism?

Understanding when clientelism is used requires a better understanding of what other realistic strategies are on the table. When deciding to invest a marginal unit of effort or resources in clientelism, what are politicians truly deciding against? Although clientelism is traditionally contrasted with programmatic, policy-based competition (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007), politicians and parties rarely face a binary choice between these extremes. Instead, many parties appear to engage in more complex hybrid appeals, simultaneously mixing various types of nonprogrammatic appeals with different combinations of personalism, populism, and programmatic policy across different electoral jurisdictions, state resources, points in the electoral cycle, and/or types of voters (Levitsky 2003, Kramon & Posner 2013, Luna 2014, Resnick 2014, Weitz-Shapiro 2014, Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016).

As they do so, different candidates and parties do not face the same choice sets. The available nonclientelist options likely differ substantially across contexts, shaped by factors such as state capacity, bureaucratic capture, the strength of party ties, technological change, and levels of development (Shefter 1977). For example, programmatic promises that some parties can use in lieu of clientelism likely remain noncredible and unavailable in settings with lower state capacity (Keefer & Vlaicu 2008, Nathan 2019). The emergence of new media technologies—such as newspapers and television historically or the internet today—provides parties with new, nonclientelist options that were previously unavailable (Mainwaring & Zoco 2007, Stokes et al. 2013). Properly theorizing decisions to use clientelism requires more carefully defining the other options.

What Is the Relative Efficiency of Clientelism?

We also foresee large returns to more rigorously estimating the relative efficiency—or yield rates—of the different strategies in these choice sets. We contend above that politicians will continue with clientelist appeals even where the commitment problem is not fully resolved as long as they believe clientelism remains a more efficient use of resources than the plausible alternatives. So far, however, the field lacks strong measures of the efficiency of different strategies, or even of politicians' perceptions of these costs and benefits. This raises unresolved puzzles. For example, Kramon (2017) argues that politicians engage in unmonitored vote buying to send informational signals about their reputation—but why not send the same signals via a radio ad? It is not clear *ex ante* that the per-vote cost of distributing pre-election handouts will be lower, especially if the radio ad reaches far more people for the same total expenditure.

Some studies are making promising steps in this direction. Cruz et al. (2018) engage in an explicit cost–benefit analysis of vote buying versus policy messaging from the perspective of mayoral candidates in the Philippines. Although they find that policy messaging is effective in a field experiment, their data suggest that vote buying still dominates because it remains a more efficient expenditure per vote.¹⁰

What Is the Role of Bottom-Up Voter Agency in Clientelism?

Clientelism is typically defined as hierarchical (Hicken 2011), with politicians above taking advantage of voters below in a system of “perverse accountability” (Stokes 2005). Accordingly, the use of clientelism is most commonly modeled as a strategic decision made by politicians, not voters (Stokes 2005, Keefer & Vlaicu 2008, Stokes et al. 2013, Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016). Yet, as described in the previous section, recent research demonstrates that voters are sometimes clientelism's main instigators; many exchanges seem to be voter initiated, with resourceful citizens approaching politicians to demand assistance (Auyero 2000, Lindberg 2010, Nichter & Peress 2017, Nichter 2018, Hicken et al. 2019, Nathan 2019).

Voter-initiated clientelism helps explain the dynamics of credibility buying and turf protection, in which politicians continue clientelist exchanges despite their clear inefficiency because they fear that voters will punish them for not responding to their demands for resources. But key elements of voter-initiated clientelism deserve more exploration: Which voters are able to initiate these exchanges, and why? Under what conditions are their bottom-up demands more binding on politicians? How do voters perceive a politician's refusal to provide demanded benefits?

¹⁰For another example in this vein, see Chapter 7 of Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2016).

What Is the Role of Brokers in Clientelism?

Many scholars assume that brokers primarily serve to solve informational asymmetries between parties and voters. By virtue of their close social ties to the electorate, brokers are thought to possess privileged information about voters' preferences and behavior that parties need to solve the commitment problem (Stokes 2005, Stokes et al. 2013, Camp 2017). But given that so much individual-level clientelism appears to unfold without direct monitoring or enforcement, it is worth questioning whether providing information about voters' behavior is really the main job of most brokers.

This raises a new puzzle: Brokers are clearly still central actors in clientelism (Mares & Young 2016), so what else are brokers doing? Recent literature increasingly focuses on the other roles that brokers perform for politicians, such as identifying which voters have social norms of reciprocity that allow exchanges to be self-enforcing (Finan & Schechter 2012, Ravanilla et al. 2018, Duarte et al. 2019), facilitating collective action (Baldwin 2015), providing access to mobilizable voters (Hicken et al. 2019), assisting in nonelectoral governance functions (Zarazaga 2014), or serving as local problem solvers who target personalized resources in response to bottom-up voter demands (Zarazaga 2014, Szwarcberg 2015, Nichter & Peress 2017, Auerbach & Thachil 2018, Brierley & Nathan 2019). Future research can build on these studies to develop new theories of brokered politics that focus more attention on these intermediaries' other tasks.

CONCLUSION

When many political scientists (the authors included) start a new research project on clientelism or begin teaching students about the topic, they start from the standard assumption that clientelism involves an enforced *quid pro quo* with credible commitments. To the extent that observed patterns in our research or course readings do not fit, we usually treat them as exceptions with some deviant feature that needs to be explained away, or instead label these practices as something else, casting them into a poorly defined residual category of nonprogrammatic appeals.

But this standard starting point is increasingly out of step with the large majority of scholarship on clientelism that has been produced over the last decade. If we take the contributions of the recent literature seriously, we have two choices. Either we must recognize that real clientelism is much rarer than we often think, or we must adjust our underlying assumptions about what clientelism typically looks like. If we take this second approach, our starting point should now be that even if clientelism is intended to be a *quid pro quo*, it often lacks fully credible commitments and is rarely directly monitored or enforced at the individual level. Rather than continuing to try to validate standard expectations in the face of increasing evidence that they often do not hold, scholars can more productively expand the field's understanding of clientelism by updating their expectations and shifting focus to other more puzzling features of nonprogrammatic politics.

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