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Clientelism in Historical and Comparative Perspective

SIMONA PIATTONI

Clientelism as Strategy

Political clientelism and patronage are widely diffused phenomena spanning across time and space and touching virtually all political systems in which votes count for something. In Europe, political clientelism and patronage are commonly considered as phenomena typical of only some countries, normally the Latin or Mediterranean countries.¹ The ascription of clientelism and patronage to given geographical areas goes hand in hand with their attribution to the cultural traits that supposedly uniquely characterize these countries, such as familism, tribalism, clannism, “orientalism.” Political clientelism and patronage are, thus, generally understood as cultural phenomena: as the reflection onto the political sphere of a generalized way of conceiving interpersonal relations, particularly those between the powerful and the powerless. Alternatively, they are blamed on the distorted or incomplete development of given political systems. According to this second view, lasting marks were impressed early on onto the system of political representation of these countries—an imprint which even today affects the way in which interests are represented and promoted in these polities. For both the culturalist and the developmentalist approach, then, clientelism and patronage are structural features of given polities,

¹ In reality, patronage and clientelism are ubiquitous phenomena and an exceptionally vast literature supports this contention; see Roniger (1981, 1994) for extensive bibliographies. Yet for a long time and even today, they have been considered typical of the Mediterranean-Latin world. It suffices to take a look at the table of contents of Gellner and Waterbury (1977) or Eisenstadt and Lemarchand (1981) to confirm the bias. Later volumes, such as Schmidt et al. (1977), Clapham (1982), Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984), Roniger and Güneş-Ayata (1994), and Briquet and Sawicki (1998), considerably expanded the scope of analysis, including countries from Asia, Africa, America, and non-Mediterranean Europe.
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which therefore explains their resilience even in the face of momentous social and political transformations.

This book, rather, starts from the assumption that clientelism and patronage are strategies for the acquisition, maintenance, and aggrandize-ment of political power, on the part of the patrons, and strategies for the protection and promotion of their interests, on the part of the clients, and that their deployment is driven by given sets of incentives and disincentives. As such, their relative diffusion is connected with, yet not determined by, the emergence, transformation, and demise of constellations of institutional and historical circumstances which make these strategies politically more or less viable and socially more or less acceptable. It should not be surprising, then, to find these phenomena in a variety of political systems characterized by allegedly rather different (political) cultures and social structures, and to observe their ebb and flow within the same political system in connection with the transformation of the set of incentives which make them viable and acceptable.

As political strategies, clientelism and patronage have the capacity to adapt to the existing circumstances as well as to alter them. Although they more or less likely depend on the sets of circumstances – generally conceivable as costs and benefits – in which patrons and clients happen to make their choices, their adoption is ultimately always a question of choice. Hence, while the study of the contextual circumstances in which clientelism and patronage are adopted may allow us to reach general statements – of limited spatial and temporal validity, to be sure – about the greater or lesser likelihood with which these particular strategies will be adopted, we still allow for the strategic choices of individual actors to prove these expectations wrong. In other words, while the logic of the argument made by this book is macro, it allows for micro-decisions both to supersede the contextual circumstances and to alter them.

The approach to clientelism and patronage as political strategies is as timely as it has important theoretical consequences. Several authors (e.g., Fantozzi 1993, Moss 1995, Vitali 1996) have recently lamented the lack of an approach to clientelism and patronage which is capable of accounting for the wide variety of clientelist and patronage systems while explaining their resilience under changing contextual circumstances. The challenge, then, is to account at the same time for adaptability and resilience or, better, for resilience through adaptability. The goal of this book, then, is to identify the sets of incentives that make political clientelism and patronage into viable and acceptable strategies or, conversely, make them impractical and
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unacceptable within the West European context, while also pointing to the real maneuvering room left to individual and collective choice.

A subsidiary goal is to challenge the dichotomous view, recently pro-
pounded by Robert Putnam (1993) in his study of Italian regions’ institu-
tional performance, that politics can be neatly divided into two groups: those in which particular interests are promoted at the expense of the general interest – the clientelist polities – and those in which particular interests manage to be expressed as particular cases of broader categorical interests – the civic polities.² By arguing that politics is inherently partic-
laristic and that what makes the difference is how particular interests are presented, promoted, and aggregated, this volume wants to substitute a multivariate vision of politics for this dichotomous view. “Constituency service,” “brokerage politics,” “pork-barrel politics,” to name just a few, are some of the expressions which denote the promotion of particularistic interests without regard for, and even at the expense of, “the general inter-
est” in otherwise “civic” polities.³ Existing democracies strike different compromises between the protection of particular interests and the pro-
motion of the general interest, hence represent different mixes of partic-
ularism and universalism. Each of these compromises includes certain interests and excludes others, with different consequences for the policies that are enacted and the political culture which gets promoted.⁴

This introductory chapter presents the theoretical approach which informs this volume and proposes a critical overview of the classical liter-
ature on clientelism. The evidence which will illustrate and support the theoretical argument is drawn from past and present West European poli-
tics and takes up the remainder of the volume. By limiting the analysis to Western Europe, we certainly do not wish to suggest that political clien-
telism is a phenomenon characteristic of this part of the world in par-
ticular. The geographical delimitation, rather, is suggested by analytical

² Admittedly, Putnam (1993) builds continuous or interval variables to measure the institu-
tional performance (dependent variable) and the degree of civism (independent variable) of the Italian regions. However, when plotted against one another, these two variables give rise to two rather distinct blocs of regions, which are then labeled “civic” and “clientelist,” respectively (p. 98ff). The historical account of how the two blocs got formed further polarizes the analysis (pp. 121–62), creating two ideal-typical modes of political regulation.

³ The question of whether anything like the “general interest” exists is obviously a con-
tenious one, which is discussed in greater depth in the concluding chapter.

⁴ A more detailed comparative discussion of these different systems of interest representa-
tion is developed in the concluding chapter.
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considerations. By focusing on an area which shared the fundamental processes of state-building and political mobilization, on the one hand, and whose citizenry shares a similar cultural heritage (Christianity, Roman law, feudalism, etc.) and a similar social structure (grounded in the historical subdivision in estates), on the other, and yet appears to encompass large differences among the predominant kinds of particularistic politics, we wish to determine which sets of circumstances underlie the relative diffusion of and the nature of particularistic politics – clientelism and patronage included.

Before discussing in greater detail the theoretical approach espoused by this volume and contrasting it to the conventional approaches, it is necessary to tackle some definition issues. While clientelism and patronage amount fundamentally to the same type of exchange, they evoke different mental images, which need to be described and discussed if we are to use these terms with precision.

**Some Issues of Definition**

Determining what causes the presence or absence of clientelism and patronage and their relative diffusion is a difficult task, which is further complicated by the confusion which surrounds their definition. It seems, therefore, appropriate to put forth a few definitions that are used consistently throughout the volume and that, if analytically fruitful, may further the development of this field of inquiry. In proposing rather minimal definitions of patronage and clientelism, my aim is to establish the genus from which species – variants of patronage and clientelism – may be derived by adding connotating elements to the definitional few. Replacement of definitional traits will instead denote cognate, but different phenomena.\(^5\)

To begin with, we need to discuss the relationship between clientelism and patronage. So far we have used them together, as denoting largely the same phenomenon, that is, *the trade of votes and other types of partisan support in exchange for public decisions with divisible benefits*. And, in fact, the two terms are commonly used interchangeably, patronage being more diffused in the English-speaking world and clientelism stemming from the Roman lexical tradition. However, patronage seems to have plural meanings, in part coinciding with the British and American uses of the term. We must

\(^5\) My debt, here and elsewhere, to Sartori (1970, 1984) should be clear. See also Kitschelt (2000: 853).
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therefore begin by discussing these two terms and the mental images that they elicit.

Sometimes patronage is used to denote the public resources – jobs, goods, and public decisions – which constitute the object of the exchange between patrons and clients. But even when used to describe the exchange itself, patronage acquires different connotations depending on which side of the Atlantic it is used. In the British scholarly tradition, patronage serves to indicate mostly the distribution of posts in the administration to people from a given constituency in return for electoral support. The distribution of governmental largesse, which normally comes with such a slanted assignment of administrative posts, takes backstage and is generally considered as an inevitable consequence of the former. 6 This kind of patronage then suggests the existence of strong “organic” ties between representatives and public officials, on the one hand, and the constituency, on the other. Although it imparts a class, local, or ethnic bias to public decision-making, it does not systematically bend public decision-making to favor selected individuals and is, therefore, not perceived as wrong or immoral as long as the representatives manage to channel back to the community of reference – the constituency – resources from the state.

This type of patronage characterized mostly the early phases of the political development of many European countries, at a time when political mobilization was still low and the parties were still largely “eletioneering committees.” When represented and representatives largely belonged to the same social strata, election in a district could be obtained with just a handful of votes, and the public administration was limited in size and not fully professionalized, it was appealing and possible to distribute appointments in the public administration to members of the same constituency in exchange for electoral support. 7

6 In the Anglo-American tradition, this phenomenon would be called more precisely the “spoils system.”

7 What connection is there between patronage, thus defined, and patrimonialism? In patrimonial systems, public offices are owned and treated as private possessions: the officeholders are entitled to drawing an economic profit from the discharge of their public duties and can bequeath their job to their descendants. Under patronage the jobs cannot be passed down to offspring (even though there are cases of offices passed on from father to son, cf., Briquet 1997) nor does the officeholder normally draw extra profits from the discharge of his duties, but rather a fixed salary. However, as the prestige attached to such offices can be great, the officeholder does indeed enjoy additional benefits. For example, he is uniquely positioned to know about public policies that could affect his revenues and can act in a timely fashion and through preferential channels to protect his wealth. In this way, social
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Whereas in nineteenth-century Britain, patronage truly reflected the “organic” ties between representatives and constituencies, in continental Europe patronage often showed a less benign face and was less the expression of constituency ties than sheer instrument of repressive rule. Here, patronage would serve less the interests of the communities than those of the ruling classes, delivering governmental majorities that had no connection with the socioeconomic composition, the real interests, and the actual needs of the represented. In continental Europe, then, patronage came to indicate a phenomenon closer to that denoted by the American use of the term: the instrumental use of positions of power to distribute jobs, goods, and other public decisions to partisan supporters in order to maintain and strengthen positions of political power. This kind of patronage, then, is closely related to clientelism, which needs to be defined in its turn.

While denoting fundamentally the same type of political exchange as patronage, clientelism is a phenomenon typical of fully mobilized polities, in which the distribution of jobs in the public administration no longer suffices to secure any fundamental advantage to the incumbents. The expansion of the public administration and the increasing extension of state responsibilities into areas of social concern formerly within the private sphere multiply the jobs that can be distributed in view of their electoral return and explains why an inflated form of patronage can be found also in many fully mobilized polities. However, in order to truly reach the masses, methods other than the handing out of public jobs in exchange for partisan support are needed. With clientelism, all public decision-making may become a token of exchange: from a birth certificate to a building permit, from a disability pension to public housing, from a development project to a tax exemption.9

and economic status, on the one hand, and political activity, on the other, feed onto each other, reinforcing each other and creating veritable socioeconomic and political dynasties. As for the connection between patronage and nepotism, this latter could be considered as a particular form of the former, in which only family members and close friends get the plum jobs in return for support and loyalty. On the likely resurgence of patrimonialism in contemporary societies, see Theobald (1992).

8 This distinction between insular and continental Europe is suggestive and must not be understood rigidly. On the continent, for example, the Dutch provinces came very close to the British situation (see Chapter 5 below).

9 The most striking feature of mass clientelism is that, in an effort to truly reach the masses, it often works through fairly impersonal means, such as the passage of laws or implementation of measures that favor entire categories of persons. This impersonalism constitutes a problem for those who analyze clientelism in terms of the structure of the clientelistic relationship, as we see below.
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Patronage and clientelism, then, are largely the same phenomenon, with the latter being more penetrating and all-encompassing than the former. According to the above characterization, then, clientelism “implies” patronage: in order to bend the administrative decision-making process to particularistic criteria, in view of the electoral return that this would yield, the elected officials need to be able to put pressure on career officials, hence to control (albeit informally) their hiring, firing, and advancement. The close link between elected and career officials is commonplace in many so-called clientelist polities, even those in which hiring, firing, and advancement are nominally regulated by impersonal rules.

With clientelism, the emphasis is clearly put on the clients: how to win their vote, retain their support, command their allegiance. This alone shows that the balance of power between patron and clients has shifted in time: democratization and the extension of citizenship rights, on the one hand, and the bureaucratization of political leadership, on the other, have redefined the balance of power between patrons and clients. The clients are no longer “forced” to enter the clientelist deal, if they do not wish to, but rather choose to do so in order to gain privileged access to public resources. Moreover, they increasingly do so as members of broader categories of individuals with grounds for claiming publicly allocated resources. The patrons, in turn, are no longer secure of their power basis, as this depends on the political consensus that they muster. Nor can they be sure that the “clientelist deal” will be honored, as no legal enforcement mechanism can be devised. Once these trends are taken into account – that clientelism is becoming more and more bureaucratized and impersonal and tends to involve entire categories of persons in the role of both patrons and clients, and that enforcement becomes more and more difficult – it becomes increasingly clear that clientelism is but a variant of particularistic politics – “politics as usual,” we would be tempted to say – and that singling it out as cultural pathology and developmental distortion is wrong.

Corruption, which is often likened to both patronage and clientelism on the rather weak ground that these two constitute a “corruption” (in a common language sense) of the democratic ideal, is rather the exchange of money (or monetizable goods) for decisions on the part of career or elected officials that favor economically particular individuals or groups. Whether or not votes are contextually exchanged is irrelevant. This, too, is a case of privatization of public decision-making, but it remains a phenomenon very different from either patronage or clientelism. While it may be argued that clientelism may lead to corruption, these two phenomena are not necessarily
linked nor do they necessarily have a common root. Indeed, it would seem that corruption is an even more ubiquitous phenomenon than either patronage or clientelism, spanning across geographical areas, political cultures, and levels of development (Della Porta and Mény 1997).

To conclude this definitional overview, a word should be spent also on organized crime as it, too, has been often closely associated with the previous phenomena (Blok 1974, Walston 1988) and blamed on the particular ethos or developmental path of certain political systems (Caciagli 1996). Organized crime seeks to control illegal markets and to enforce certain types of illegal exchanges (Gambetta 1993). However, organized crime shows the tendency to become involved in and distort public decision-making processes. First, as organized crime fatally clashes against the official structures of the state in its operations, it has to deal with it either by fighting it or, possibly more effectively, by trying to influence it. Second, organized crime finds in the market for public contracts one instance of those types of markets – characterized by restricted access, large sums of money, and the possibility to single out the “buyers” and apply threats to bend their decisions – which it is uniquely equipped to overtake and regulate. In this case, too, what matters is how vulnerable the state is to the attempted inroads of organized crime. And in this case, as well as in the previous cases, political development has something to say in this regard: a weak ruling class and a corruptible administration may invite the expansion of organized crime into the market for votes and for public works. By infiltrating these markets and by corrupting the rules that should regulate them – as when votes are delivered under the threat of violence or contracts are obtained by bribing public officials – organized crime widens its sphere of operation. However, organized crime is primarily an economic phenomenon which, out of necessity or convenience, spills into the political sphere.

Conventional Approaches to Clientelism

Scholars of patronage and clientelism have produced a rich and fascinating literature covering the many embodiments of these phenomena in

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10 It is sometimes argued that when an entrepreneur offers to employ a politician's supporters in exchange for a public contract, this is a form of clientelism practically indistinguishable from corruption. I would propose to see this as a double exchange: the first, between the entrepreneur and the politician involving the trade of the availability of jobs for public contract, is a corrupt exchange; the second, between the politician and the clients involving the trade of jobs for votes, is a clientelist exchange.
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different times and different places. A less felicitous result has been con-
ceptual stretching. To reach some common ground on which to base a
meaningful discussion, scholars have sought to distill a definition of the
patron–client relation. Yet, starting from largely ethnographic research
material, they ended up hypostatizing an archetype of the patron–client
relation closely resembling the landlord–peasant relation most common
in traditional agrarian societies. For example, Sydel Silverman defines
patronage as “an informal contractual relationship between persons of
unequal status and power, which imposes reciprocal obligations of a
different kind on each of the parties” (Silverman 1977a: 296).

Drawing from the possibly most authoritative and exhaustive definition
of patron–client relation by Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984: 48–49), which
summarizes the work of many other authors, the main elements of the
patron–client relation appear to be: (1) the dyadic, personal nature of
the relation, (2) the simultaneous exchange of unspecified bundles of
resources, (3) the sense of obligation inherent in the relation, often verging
on emotional attachment, and (4) the informal, semilegal character of the
relation. Of these traits, it is particularly the personal, dyadic nature of the
patron–client relation and the emotional attachment, which is supposedly
engendered by it, that need to be called into question, as their insertion
among the definitional traits of the patron–client relation has rooted in
the public imagery the idea of patronage and clientelism as characteristic
of traditional societies. According to this view, the contamination of the
public sphere of interaction with a type of relationship that should rule
only private dealings “reveals” the traditional nature of these societies, in
which private and public role structures and spheres of interaction are not
yet completely separate and autonomous. As we argued above, such an
understanding of clientelism is culturalist because it blames on the particu-
lar culture of certain societies the presence in the public sphere of modes
of interaction characteristic of the private domain. It is also development-
alist because it argues that only in polities marred by a defective process
of development could such a confusion between private and public modes

\[\text{11} \] Although rarely found in contemporary societies, such an archetype still serves as a
benchmark against which deviations and developments are measured. To denote the more
contemporary variants, which point to mutations in the more established concepts of
“clientelism,” “patronage,” and “machine politics,” many new categories have been
created, such as “clientelism of the notables” and “clientelism of the bureaucracy” (Tarrow
1967), “bureaucratic clientelism” (Lyrintzis 1984), “semi-clientelism” (Fox 1994), and
“low-level” and “high-level” clientelism (Papadopoulos 1997), to name but a few.
of interaction persist, sometimes because of the willful action of the ruling classes.12

Personalism and dyadicity may indeed have characterized traditional clientelism in subsistence (particularly agrarian) societies, but they are hardly typical of political clientelism in contemporary societies. How can the patron–client relationship, which according to this view is by definition personal and dyadic, become impersonal and categorical and still remain clientelist? Some scholars (Boissevain 1974) have attempted to solve this paradox by invoking the existence of long and sometimes obscure chains of friends of friends, so that, even though the system functions rather impersonally and involves great numbers of people, personalism and dyadicity are retained at each step of the chain.13 And, indeed, Eisenstadt and Roniger insert among the definitional traits of the patron–client relation that (5) “these relations are undertaken between individuals or networks of individuals in a vertical fashion” (1984: 48).14 Yet, as we know from, for example, Tarrow (1967), Weingrod (1968), Caciagli et al. (1977), Silverman (1977b), and Mavrogordatos (1997), clientelism can involve also entire corporate groups, such as producers’ associations, trade unions, and political parties.15 How can these cases be subsumed under the definition of patron–client relation given above if not by shedding at least person-

12 Historically, accusations of clientelism have been used in the struggles between opposed political formations, with the ruling elites trying to maintain control of political representation by labeling the political opponents, and representatives of different social interests, as “opportunist” or “transformist” (Briquet 1997). In those countries where the functional cleavage (primary vs. secondary sector) coincided with a territorial (center vs. periphery) or a constitutional cleavage (monarchy vs. republic), the political discourse tended to generate a specific “geography of clientelism,” with areas criticized as “backward and clientelist” (e.g., the Italian south) and areas celebrated as “modern and civic” (e.g., the Italian north and center) simply because they happened to be the strongholds, respectively, of the governing and opposition parties. Social scientists have sometimes consciously or unconsciously ended up bestowing scientific legitimacy upon such political operations (e.g., Banfield 1958; Putnam 1993). The classical reference to cleavages is Lipset and Rokkan (1967).

13 This has in turn led to the elaboration of the concept of “broker” as someone whose career is built on his capacity to establish a contact between clients and patrons (Boissevain 1974).

14 This is the trait of clientelism that most disheartens liberal scholars like Putnam (1993).

15 And, even before them, Boissevain (1966: 23) argued, “The present-day Sicilian has more than one patron and works through the one that he deems most useful in a given situation. As relations become progressively specialized and the Sicilian moves out of his relatively isolated community to deal with increasingly diverse decision-makers – thus requiring functionally specialized patrons – the danger of an encounter between two patrons operating in the same social field diminishes.”