State Power and Clientelism

Eight Propositions for Discussion *

Jonathan Fox

“What counts” as clientelism? For those who observe and experience clientelism, they know it when they see it. That approach is not enough for those who seek to analyze the political dynamics and impact of clientelism. Past approaches to the study of clientelism, often informed by anthropology and sociology, focused on microlevel, imbalanced, exchange-based, power relations, infused with rituals of affect, favors, and gifts. More recently, political scientists have addressed their concern with larger-scale, more generalizable patterns by focusing on more bounded indicators of exchange relationships. In the process of emphasizing measurability, this trend applies definitions that narrow the scope of “what counts” as clientelism, e.g., to vote-buying or to social programs that distribute “private goods”.

Cutting across these approaches is a concern for understanding how informal power relations infuse the behavior of formal institutions. Specifically, the authors in this volume share a concern with understanding how clientelistic relationships persist under elected democratic regimes, in spite of clientelism’s longstanding association with relations of domination that appear to undermine basic principles of political equality.

The main challenge involved in defining clientelism is how to distinguish this particular power relationship from other kinds of political exchanges. I described clientelism as “a relationship based on political subordination in exchange for material rewards” (Fox, 1994, 153). Yet this definition was too broad to meet the challenge of disentangling clientelism from other reciprocal exchanges between actors of unequal power—an idea that describes most political bargaining.
If the definition of clientelism becomes so broad so as to encompass all political bargaining between unequals, then it loses its conceptual value-added. In other words, the issue is how to “bound” the concept—that is, how to avoid what Sartori (1970) called “conceptual stretching” (see chapter 9, Hilgers, this volume). Where, then, does one draw the line? This volume’s editor responds to this definitional question by emphasizing the long-term, iterative nature of the political-material exchange relationship—as distinct from a one-off transaction (see chapter 9, Hilgers, this volume; Hicken, 2011). This focus on the relationship underscores the role of agency within clientelism, in contrast to the transaction-driven approach, or an exclusive focus on the intent of political “investors.”

Two decades ago, this author’s response to the dilemma of how to distinguish clientelism from other kinds of political bargaining among unequals was to sharpen the analytical and empirical focus on specifically authoritarian forms of clientelism, relationships in which the political subordination of clients is enduring and reinforced by the threat of coercion (Fox, 1994). The goal was to underscore the difference between specifically anti-democratic exchanges from political bargains that may be normatively questionable but are not inherently anti-democratic. The focus was both micro and macro.

At the microlevel, the political construction of the right to associational autonomy was a relevant and under-recognized step in the establishment of the minimum conditions for political democracy (Fox 1994). This is why access to perceived ballot secrecy was crucial for undergirding the transition from authoritarian clientelism to citizenship, to allow those voters who engaged in political transactions to still express their political preferences without fear of possibly coercive reprisals (Fox, 1994; 2007). This issue of citizen-level access to political rights scales up to the macro level through the changing size and shape of the free versus the “captive” electorate. Some analysts refer to persistent authoritarian enclaves, but if captive subnational electorates determine the national balance of political power, then the term “enclave” may underestimate their national significance. Indeed, if any fraction of an electorate is captive, then the regime may be electoral and competitive, but it is by definition not democratic—if one accepts that (free and fair) universal suffrage is a minimum condition for democracy.

Now that many more regimes have made transitions to competitive electoral democracy, the scope and depth of overtly authoritarian clientelistic practices have been substantially reduced (though not completely eliminated or irrelevant to national politics, as many