When Clients Become Collective Actors

Participatory Budgeting, Changing Mobilization Patterns, and Varieties of Clientelism in Democratizing Recife (Brazil)

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With the previous administration, I realized that it was not important to be a delegate, but you needed to have political influence or the public works would not be done. In the new model, I thought things would be different. On paper, it is, but in reality, it is not. I regret, but I can only say that.

PB Delegate, Recife

Political clientelism is traditionally defined as a vertical relationship based on an informal and unequal exchange of private goods for political favors where the client (often the poor/vulnerable citizen) is maintained in a position of weakness through his dependence on the patron (the powerful politician/political broker) for access to the basic rights of citizenship. Public goods are distributed according to political loyalty, an exchange based on informal (yet binding) understanding of the relationship on both parts and generally conducted through direct and face-to-face interactions guided by a certain sense of reciprocity and friendship (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Roniger 1990). Originally associated to a marginal phenomenon pertaining to traditional/agrarian societies, the type of informal exchange...
characterizing clientelism has however survived and adapted to economic and political modernization, becoming a central concern for analysts of state-society relationships in democracy.

Is democracy incompatible with clientelism? What is the impact of clientelism on democracy? On one hand, at least in part of the literature, clientelism is negatively connotated as a remnant of authoritarian regimes and accounted for as a legacy playing against the deepening of democracy (Hagopian 1996). On the other hand, democratization and pluralism changed the terms according to which linkages between citizens and politicians are defined, and clientelism can become a political strategy used by political parties to secure votes and by citizens to secure their privileged access to politicians and resources. Thus, the issue is not only to think about the impact of clientelism on democracy, but also about the opposite relationship: Is it possible that democracy and, more precisely, its representative and participatory institutions and practices, contribute to the transformation of clientelism? How has clientelism adapted to the new context of pluralism, political competition, and popular participation? Students of clientelism in democratizing contexts have started thinking differently about the realm of possible relationships between clientelism and democracy, questioning the traditional conceptualization of clients as individuals. What happens when the protagonists of the clientelistic deals become organized groups, as opposed to individuals? Is clientelism—and the policy outcome of the clientelistic deal—reinvented through the process?

Through a comparative analysis of Recife’s experience with participatory budgeting (PB), this chapter aims to contribute to the debate on the changing nature of clientelism and its varieties in democracy. PB is a good example of democratizing political action that can, under certain institutional and sociopolitical conditions, contribute to a modification of the nature of state-society linkages. As a participatory institutional framework aimed at including the input of “ordinary” citizens in budgetary decision-making, PB has been developed in several Brazilian municipalities, mostly inspired from the well-know success of Porto Alegre’s model (Wampler and Avritzer 2005). PB’s institutions formally allow ordinary citizens—and especially the poor and traditionally marginalized—to take an active part in the decision-making process, contributing to the design and implementation of urban development policies and projects. Examples of regularly approved proposals include street paving, street lighting, water sewage, sanitation infrastructures, public parks, health centers, primary schools, playgrounds, and so on, while the grand infrastructural and