In Latin America’s federal countries, regime change produced a paradox: although, at the federal level, the transition to democracy was largely successful and has gradually consolidated, at the subnational level, some authoritarian regimes and repressive practices survived. It has been argued that neopatrimonialism allowed these subnational authoritarian elites to remain in power. By tapping into different sources of legitimacy and combining arbitrary power, tradition, and rule of law, these elites have constructed political intermediation monopolies in extremely heterogeneous societies (Durazo Herrmann 2010). Nevertheless, this same social heterogeneity forces neopatrimonial elites to construct large social coalitions, including the maximum possible number of both traditional and modern social sectors to guarantee local governance. These coalitions are complex and fragile by nature, since they depend on a continuous flow of material resources to survive (Eisenstadt 1973, Médard 1991).

Clientelism is an exchange-based political relationship and a common tool in coalition building in patrimonial and neopatrimonial societies (Murilo de Carvalho 1997; chapter 9, Hilgers, this volume). Consequently, in this chapter, I attempt to isolate the role it plays in the recent evolution of Oaxaca’s (Mexico) and Bahia’s (Brazil) political systems.
I argue that clientelism is a key, albeit imperfect instrument in the hybridization process that allowed subnational elites to adopt formally democratic reforms while retaining substantial authoritarian practices (Diamond 2002). On the one hand, by ensuring a measure of political control, clientelism has been an element of subnational certainty in the unstable environment of federal regime change. On the other hand, by linking formal change and long-standing informal institutions, clientelism has been subject to substantive pressures that transformed its nature and its role in the subnational political system, allowing for greater political competition. This paradox reflects the ambiguities and contradictions of hybrid democratization, in which—using Hilgers’s (chapter 1, this volume) introductory terminology—clientelism simultaneously erodes and accompanies democratic processes.

After briefly defining the key concepts in my analysis (subnational authoritarianism, clientelism, hybridization), I will analyze the role of clientelism in two subnational political systems: Oaxaca and Bahia. After a brief historical overview, I will then analyze the place of clientelism during the transition period (roughly between 1986 and 2006). I will then address the role of clientelism in the failed popular revolt in Oaxaca and in the opposition’s electoral victory in 2006 in Bahia and 2010 in Oaxaca. I will conclude with a reflection on the relationship between clientelism and democratization in subnational context, pointing to a further ambiguity: the possibility of clientelism supporting democracy.

Clientelism, Hybridization, and Subnational Authoritarianism

Authoritarian enclaves are defined as jurisdictions in which certain important issues (such as parliamentary representation or the assignment of certain public resources) are excluded from open political debate (Garretón 1989). In the context of a federal country, authoritarian enclaves can take a territorial dimension when a particular subnational state restricts open debate on some—or perhaps most—political issues, despite substantial democratization at the federal level. In both cases, the contours of the authoritarian enclave can be ambiguous and fluctuating.

In a key feature of subnational authoritarian enclaves, federal actors have permanent legal and legitimate access to subnational politics, which lack the insulation provided by sovereignty. Although this presence need not be constant or systematic, even a momentary influx