Introduction

Patron–client relations have played an important role in the recruitment, mobility, and behavior of politicians throughout the over seven decades of Soviet power. Operating in a highly centralized institutional setting and guided by a set of norms that reflected the hierarchical nature of political relations, Soviet officials have relied upon clientelistic ties to advance their interests in an essentially insecure political environment. These informal networks of interconnected careers have been critical to the formation of governing coalitions, bridging individual, institutional, sectoral, and regional interests. They have been a major device for increasing and maintaining politicians’ power and authority.

However, among the approaches to the study of the Soviet political elite and policy making, patronage has remained an enigmatic and confounding factor. Our limited knowledge about clientelistic norms has stemmed in part from a paucity of information regarding established rules and practices of Soviet elite mobility and regime formation. The lack of extensive biographical and attitudinal data for the national political elite, along with the near absence of systematic data for subnational officials, has obscured the identification of such relationships and their norms. These extra-legal informal political associations are, by their very nature, difficult to identify. The governing ethos of the Soviet Union has decried and denied them. Given these dilemmas, the scholarly work that has been done on patronage, elite mobility, and regime formation has generally been qualitative, time and context-specific, and often speculative. The policy-making implications of these ties and networks have remained essentially unexplored.

The traditional Soviet political system has been hierarchical and highly centralized. There have been no alternative sources of power outside the unified set of party and government hierarchies. Patron-
age and other manifestations of a second polity have been decisive in this system, providing the necessary slack for it to operate, albeit incrementally. Patronage has served as an adhesive binding individuals and groups together, bridging various organized interests. Coalitions of protégés who worked and ascended the system together, supplemented with relative newcomers and allies whose policy and career interests merged, provided the basis for governance. Contrary to the more common arguments characterizing political patronage as merely politics of blatant economic nepotism, these networks have provided coherence to the political process. Although lower-level networks could obstruct regime policies and system goals, the strong central government was organizationally capable of countering many of those elements, pressuring resistant networks, and appointing new and presumably more reliable replacements. Traditional Soviet political norms helped top national leaders to grapple with the challenges of subordinate networks while enabling them to consolidate their hold on the political process by developing their own clientele.

In certain fundamental ways, this traditional Soviet setting is not unlike that of other political systems. Political development brought with it the modern bureaucracy, which has continued to grow in size and complexity for at least a century. A major challenge before modern political leadership is to control and direct that apparatus, for such mastery is a primary prerequisite for governance. The building of coalitions, in part based upon patronage, but encompassing a diversity of interests and views, has been essential to that mastery in many societies. This has been especially true where there is a lack of organized independent interest groups or competing political parties. Where power is concentrated in a rigidly hierarchical decision-making system, and where there is no viable political opposition, the structural conditions for extra-legal patron–client relationships arise. A certain rationale and legitimacy for patronage networks emerges where explicit rules and norms forbidding such informal arrangements are lacking or poorly enforced. Patron–client networks come to constitute an informal system of checks and balances that permits groups of politicians to advance their interests. The distribution of power among contending groups restrains the hegemonic urges of any single group.

Patron–client relations also have helped politicians to govern in the traditional Soviet system. Coalitions of protégés and clients representing various interests and institutions have provided a
leader – a patron – with the support to develop and undertake a policy program. In national level politics, patronage ties enhanced the ability of the Communist Party General Secretary to consolidate power, to build a governing coalition, and to fashion a comprehensive policy program. Unlike many other political systems, in which newly elected leaders form new administrations of executive personnel, the traditional Soviet system required more informal mechanisms to permit a leader to form his own administration. The process of personnel turnover, elevation of trusted protégés, and building of alliances with major interests, was drawn out. Yet the successful completion of this process was vital to the long-term career and policy interests of all top decision makers, regardless of their levels of authority. The Soviet system gave leaders at both the national and subnational levels significant discretion and initiative within their own bailiwicks. But those leaders needed the cooperation of others to see a directive or program through to its implementation.

Gorbachevian reforms are transforming the Soviet system and altering the norms by which politicians advance and behave. The institutional and political reforms of the Gorbachev period are changing strategies of elite recruitment, coalition building, and regime formation. The hierarchical and centralized power structure of the Soviet system is giving way to a more decentralized, open, and democratic political process. An expanding range of actors and interests now influences the political process, and senior officials are less able to direct the country’s political life. Moreover, informal interest associations and popular fronts are giving rise to formal interest groups and political parties that can legally compete for power with the CPSU. All of these changes contribute to a more formal separation of powers among political actors. As a result, a new rationale for career building may emerge; the politically ambitious may need new strategies to assure career success. Patron–client relations may take on a different relevance to the policy process of the 1990s.

This study of elite mobility, regime formation, and governance in the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods considers patronage as an approach to understanding the Soviet political process. I examine coalition building at both the national and regional levels through an analysis of aggregate career data for over two thousand politicians. The study assesses the manner and extent to which leaders in politically stable and less stable settings – spanning different
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national cultural contexts – have relied upon clientelistic networks to consolidate power and to govern. Analysis of Lithuanian and Azerbaidzhani republic politics confirms tendencies found at the national level. Examination of post-1985 Gorbachev period developments reveals a dynamic set of conditions that is changing the face of patronage in Soviet political reality.
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For centuries patronage relations have molded the political life of countries and their elite. In feudal and industrial societies patronage relationships were integral to the anatomy of the society itself. However, even in more highly structured political systems we find that these relationships continue to influence critical aspects of political life. Few countries have been so influenced by patronage relations as historical Russia and the Soviet Union. While many observers of Soviet and Russian politics acknowledge the importance of patronage to elite recruitment and behavior, it has largely remained an uncharted area of study. The approach here systematically explores patronage not only as a means of elite recruitment and mobility, but more importantly as a mechanism which structures the formation and development of national and subnational regimes.

The pervasiveness of patronage relations in the public arena stems in large part from the very nature of the political arena. The arena within which a political elite operates is dynamic and insecure. It is structured by the varied formal and informal mechanisms that ordinarily guide and moderate the behavior of politicians as they compete and promote their own interests.

The state, through its administrative institutions and rules, sets the most important formal parameters within which an elite operates. The expanding hierarchy of institutions within the modern bureaucracy generates ever more specialized functions and fixed rules which all aspiring officials must face. Other institutions, including popular assemblies, guide the attempts of politicians to influence the myriad of professional civil servants responsible for the effective operation of that bureaucracy. Political parties and organized associations of politicians are significant in that they allow particular interests to secure control over the state and its bureaucracy. They provide a certain degree of attitudinal constraint among
members and help regulate the efforts of a wide range of politicians to direct the policy agenda and process.

These state and nonstate institutions, through developed rules and norms, moderate – but do not obviate – the insecurity of the political domain in which the actors’ interests merge or collide. Thus, individuals active in political life often must rely upon additional, informal mechanisms to enhance their positions and advance their interests.

Among such informal mechanisms are individualized, reciprocal, political relations that often culminate in networks. These serve to link individuals’ interests and help them preserve or expand their positions. Such personalized, reciprocal, political connections are what we refer to as patronage relationships. They provide security and direction to members’ career ambitions, helping politicians both to advance and to govern.¹

The very nature of political leadership encourages the emergence of patronage relationships. Political leadership presupposes a power relationship among individuals within a group who are dependent upon one another to attain mutual goals.² Thus it assumes not only a power differential between the leader and the led, but also an exchange of sorts, a reciprocity linking the intentions and interests of all concerned.³ The leader–follower linkage develops over time, involving a series of exchanges or transactions between leaders and followers in which leaders both give and receive. The duration and the extensiveness of the transactions help to define the strength of the bond between two individuals with differing political means and potentially differing intentions.

Leaders, or possible patrons among clients, are the decision makers who set basic goals and priorities. They act as mediators within their groups, as well as spokespersons outside of them. They devote most of their resources to securing control over the decision-making process, whatever its form, and they maintain that control in order to guide and influence policy outcomes.⁴ Yet if this relationship is based on mutual exchange between the leaders and the led, just what is the form of currency? At the most basic level leaders set the parameters for adequate role behavior in the attainment of their group’s goal(s). Leaders’ continuing effectiveness is related to their group’s ultimate success.⁵ At the same time, status, recognition, and esteem afford leaders greater influence and contribute to their legitimacy as leaders. Individuals acting as leaders help to fulfill expectations, achieve group goals, and also provide rewards for others, which are in turn reciprocated in the form of heightened
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influence, status, and esteem. Although there is a distinct inequality between leader and led, the relationship is clearly interdependent.

Political patronage can be defined as an informal network of personal, political relationships which are at the same time both asymmetrical and interdependent. They are an informal mechanism that provides security and direction to the career ambitions of a nation’s political elite. The environment in which politicians operate is uncertain and hostile. It often entails a zero-sum contest among members of the elite. In this setting, a politician’s first concern is to minimize losses, not maximize gains. A major means of minimizing losses and securing one’s position is through the formulation of coalitions based upon reciprocal relationships. Relationships that already have been tested and developed over time.

A clientelism model of political group formation and behavior depicts a political system composed of such coalitions. Individuals with career aspirations often advance within a political system on the basis of their ties to politicians who possess power at higher levels of authority. The resultant networks, centered around a guiding leader or patron, are often system-wide and may operate at all levels of decision making. In such a system, patrons are able to strengthen their own political position by appointing those loyal to them, usually those who have already worked with them, to positions at lower levels. The loyalty of subordinates to patrons is derived from the political goods they receive in return, such as political power, prestige, and the promise of future advancement. By promoting loyal subordinates within the political system, politicians are able to enhance their own power position as well as effect desired policy ends. Increasingly powerful patronage networks help individuals to rise to power as well as to maintain that power.

A syndrome of characteristics distinguishes the patron–client bond. First, there is usually some kind of pre-existing personal relationship based on some kind of past experience of interaction. The parties share some degree of loyalty and reliability towards one another. However, it should be understood that this loyalty is primarily dependent upon its utility in bringing each party’s political ambitions to fruition. Loyalty could be reinforced by the intimacy of a personal relationship, by fear of coercion, or both. The patron and the client may also share political views, though this is certainly not always the case.

Second, because patrons and clients operate on different authority levels, the relationship is inherently asymmetrical. Such inequality is
not only accepted by both parties, but is a critical motivating force for both patron and client to join in the relationship. This is not to say that the power differential is always beneficial, as it could very well produce tensions which might undercut the loyalty of network members and thus weaken the patron–client bond. Equalization of the two positions could also make for just as tenuous a relationship, for without a power differential the relationship would no longer be that of a patron and client, but that of allies. An alliance in which the power differential is minimal is quite vulnerable to the exigencies of a given moment, and may not stay equal or friendly for very long.

The last, and perhaps most important, characteristic to keep in mind is this idea of reciprocity, a mutual exchange of political goods. The transactional nature of the relationship joins the parties together in a commerce of support, ideas, and favors. As individuals help one another to climb the political ladder, the patron–client bond is increasingly enhanced, thus relationships are likely to grow stronger with age. Clearly we are speaking of a relationship of interdependence, that is, a relationship in which the influence and power of one individual depends to an extent upon the influence and loyalty of another.

Patronage is often characterized as a form of corruption that serves individuals’ needs while undercutting the process of governance. A closer, systematic study will show that patronage relations serve not only to advance members within the expanding hierarchy of the bureaucracy, they also allow politicians to govern more effectively. The histories and cultural traditions of any country are critically important in determining the manner in which patronage relations emerge and operate. In many traditional and predominantly rural Latin countries, the regional cacique (boss or patron) possesses the coercive means to serve as a “political middleman,” bridging the power and resource gap between the national government and the locales. The widespread mass deference to authority in contemporary democratic Japan permits patrons at all levels (e.g. party leaders, business executives, and union officials) to assume almost exclusive responsibility for many aspects of the country’s civic and economic life.

Given these differences, I cannot comprehensively assess all country-specific, historical, and cultural background factors as they influence patron–client relations. Rather, I will explore the institutional and political circumstances that condition the way in which politicians rely on informal patronage relationships while enhancing their power and positions. Regardless of national setting, the con-
fictitious nature of political relations presupposes that the manner of power distribution among contending interests will determine the behavior patterns of political officials. Understanding the political relevance of patronage to a country’s politics requires a consideration of power distribution – among individuals and institutions, as well as interests.

Patronage relations have molded the political life of many countries and their elite, but few have been as influenced by it as the Soviet Union. Social, economic, and political conditions have encouraged the thriving of patronage networks in Russia as well as in many other nations now comprising the USSR. The tradition of a strong central autocrat, governing in tandem with powerful regional figures, has enabled clientelistic relations to flourish at various levels of political authority. The advent of Soviet power did not obviate the tsarist legacy of reliance upon patronage connections in the recruitment and mobility of elites and in the formation of regimes. In fact, Soviet political adjustments actually reinforced the political importance of these informal networks of patronage relationships.

While many observers of Soviet and Russian politics acknowledge the importance of patronage to elite recruitment, few have systematically explored it. The present approach systematically explores patronage not only as a means of elite recruitment and mobility, but more importantly as a mechanism which structures the formation and functioning of national and subnational regimes. Strong patronage networks which bridge different institutions can help a governing elite to master the policy process. The centralized, hierarchical Soviet system provides much political discretion to those who can surmount it. But at the same time, competing networks – or institutionally well-ensconced subnational networks – can confound the process of coherent policy making. Powerful networks committed to policy changes can advance initiatives, just as those protective of the status quo can assume an obstructionist stance. In the Soviet system, political patronage can facilitate both continuity and change. Only the most profound reform of the Soviet political system, i.e., with a fundamental redistribution of power and emergent pluralism, would alter the centrality of political patronage to Soviet politics.

The Soviet setting

Political patronage in the Russian and Soviet setting can signify both protektsiya, or patronage, and sviazi, or reciprocal connections. While
protektsiya has a distinctly political flavor, both terms represent networks of reciprocal favors. They transcend the political arena to encompass the social and economic dimensions of Soviet life. At the most basic level, sviazi help one to obtain material goods such as food and consumer products, arrange repairs for one’s apartment, or secure advancement in the workplace. At a higher level of social responsibility, plant managers rely upon sviazi to achieve production goals, i.e., to obtain the necessary material resources to fulfill the plan. In certain regions of the country, e.g., Georgia and Central Asia, sviazi are important not just for meeting material needs, but for strengthening traditional clan and familial solidarity. They help to determine one’s social position and influence, as well as the direction of one’s social responsibility.¹³

In many instances, patronage cultivates what has been called the “second economy,” i.e., semilegal or illegal activities directed toward private economic gain.¹⁴ Protektsiya and sviazi can therefore signify forms of premodern corruption for purely material individual interests. They may represent extralegal means by which one gains leverage in dealing with a basic economic and social uncertainty. Far from challenging the existent social structures that cushion such uncertainty, sviazi and other elements of the “second economy” provide slack and flexibility to what would otherwise be an excessively brittle set of socioeconomic structures.

Is there a comparable second polity operating in the Soviet political realm, involving the decision-making elite?¹⁵ I contend that there are comparable informal political mechanisms which are related to the formal decision-making structures but which can serve to integrate further those structures and permit them to function more effectively. For example, clientelistic ties serve as vehicles which unite politicians’ interests and provide slack in a highly hierarchical and rigid decision-making process. Yet clientelistic networks constitute an informally accepted, extralegal arrangement signifying more than an essentially illegal second polity. In the modern bureaucratic context, political clientelism can provide political integration where subordinate client politicians are loyal to a patron superior and his program. Clientelism can permit central penetration of the locales, bridging national and regional politicians, as well as regional and local politicians. As a result, the career ambitions and interests of these politicians are linked. The policy consequences may vary, however, as patronage networks may actually permit central governance or else reinforce lower-level resistance.