Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation

This book charts the evolution of clientelist practices in several Western European countries. Through the historical and comparative analysis of countries as diverse as Sweden and Greece, England and Spain, France and Italy, Iceland and the Netherlands, the authors study both the “supply side” – the institutional context in which party leaders devise and implement their political strategies – and the “demand side” – the degree of empowerment of civil society – of clientelism. This approach contends that clientelism is a particular mix of particularism and universalism, in which interests are aggregated at the level of the individual and his family (particularism), but in which all interests can potentially find expression and accommodation (universalism). In contrast, consociationalism and corporatism are systems of interest representation in which interests are aggregated at the level of “social pillar” or functional association (universalism), but in which not all interests can find representation and accommodation (particularism).

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Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Edited by

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Preface

At a time when the transformation of the European political space profoundly affects the way in which interests are democratically represented, it might be useful to revisit a political phenomenon – clientelism – that has been mostly studied as a corruption of representation rather than one of its legitimate forms. Because it provides preferential access to state-administered jobs, services, and decisions through small groups of insiders, upon which the influence of strategically positioned bureaucrats and political leaders is strong, clientelism is frequently mentioned as an apt description of some of the mechanisms at work also within the European Union. And because clientelist exchanges occur between restricted groups and individuals, on the one hand, and individual bureaucrats and representatives, on the other, clientelism captures that element of personalism which characterizes the demand and supply of representation in today’s Europe. Once considered a marginal phenomenon, clientelism may again become salient.

This book traces the roots of clientelism in the period in which democratic representation was introduced and perfected in most European countries – a period occupying approximately two centuries, from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century. The relative timing of the extension of the franchise, the social composition of the active and passive electorate, the general structure of society at the time of mass political mobilization, and, not least, the structure of the state, in particular of the public administration, are the key dynamics that explain the character of democratic representation, in general, and the space, if any, occupied by clientelism within it. The same broad dynamics explain also whether such space subsequently contracted or expanded, and which traits clientelism acquired in each country. A deeper understanding of the circumstances present
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during the expansion or contraction of clientelism should prove of interest for this period of institutional and social transformations.

I became interested in clientelism while studying economic development of two southern Italian regions in the 1970s and 1980s. What attracted my attention was the different role played by the local political classes in the promotion of economic development of these regions. Although both local political systems were generally considered clientelistic, their practical workings were very different. While in one region, Abruzzo, politics, although clientelistic, managed to provide the material and immaterial public goods — mainly infrastructure and impartial enforcement of cooperative enterprises — that sustain development; in the other, Puglia, clientelism distributed divisible benefits to selected individuals and groups, and economic growth flagged. In other words, clientelism exerted a different effect on development because it worked at different levels of aggregation — the regional community versus selected groups and individuals (Piattoni 1996). This finding ran against the conventional wisdom and prompted further study.

The more immediate impulse for embarking upon a historical and comparative reflection of clientelism came from the workshop on “Clientelist Politics and Interest Intermediation in Southern Europe” organized by Kostas Lavdas, José Magone, and Ilias Nicolacopoulos at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of Bern in 1997. The workshop brought together junior and senior scholars who, for days, engaged in an extremely stimulating debate on southern European clientelism. What was missing from that debate, however, was systematic reflection of whether clientelism is truly exclusively or even mainly a southern European phenomenon. Hence my decision to expand the scope for analysis and take a fresh look at the record of other Western European countries. Some of the participants in that workshop ended up writing chapters for this volume.

Thanks to three generous funds, one from the Norwegian Research Council (grant no. 121783/530) and two from the Faculty of the Social Sciences of the University of Tromsø (for Internasjonale symposier and for Internasjonalt samarbeid), I was able to organize two meetings, one in Tromsø in June and the other in London in November 1998, during which the contributors and I sought to develop a common vocabulary and a common approach to the study of clientelism. This was particularly important, as we came from different countries and different social disciplines — history, sociology, and political science — and began with not immediately
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compatible conceptual apparatuses. The first meeting was further enriched by the presence of four distinguished scholars – Professors Mario Caciagli, Richard Katz, Yannis Papadopoulos, and Luis Roniger – who answered our request to travel to the 70th parallel north (under rather difficult contingent conditions) to discuss our draft papers and help us in the discussion and search for a common framework. The London meeting gave us the possibility of expressing all remaining doubts and deepening our common understanding.

In the process, we have become not only an intellectual community but also a group of friends. It has been this spirit which has sustained our determination to write a volume which would not haphazardly assemble disparate think-pieces, but probe as thoroughly as possible a consistent set of propositions. These we drew, first and foremost, from Martin Shefter's 1994 book, Political Parties and the State. It is a tribute to Professor Shefter's scholarship that we found his approach to clientelism so compelling that we felt, at times, that we were only marginally improving on it. We hope, of course, to have done more than that.

The insightful comments of two anonymous reviewers and those of Paola Cesarini, who kindly commented on a handful of chapters at the 2000 Chicago Conference of Europeanists in the panel on "Spoiling Democracy with the Spoils: Patronage and Clientelism in Modern Europe," prodded us to further refine our argument and to make this book as cohesive as we could. At the end of this approximately three-year-long enterprise, I express my warmest thanks and personal feelings to the contributors to this volume, who have been willing to write and rewrite their pieces to clarify most ambiguous points. It is safe to say that without their knowledge, availability, and determination this book would have never been written. Finally, I also thank the Faculty of the Social Sciences of the University of Tromsø for its generous financial and organizational support and my ex-colleagues of the Institute of Political Science for their collegial friendship.