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*Brands as a Solution to the
 Mobilization Dilemma*

With no patronage and weaker parties, originality and resonance matter above all. You need relevant originality; your goal is to capture what are viewed as problems and to express them in a sufficiently fresh language, avoiding commonplaces: that prompts thinking and understanding.

– Interview with Antanas Mockus, mayor of Bogotá,
 1995–1997 and 2001–2003

From Exchange to Persuasion

Cities matter. Cities matter more than ever. An astonishingly large – and continuously rising – share of the world population lives in cities. In 1955 30 percent of the world’s population lived in urban areas. By 2005 that number had climbed to 48 percent, and it is forecast to include half of the world’s citizens by 2010 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2006).

How cities are governed matters. Around the world, they are becoming increasingly autonomous in their governance and gaining institutional independence. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many governments worldwide introduced direct mayoral elections or stronger mayoral powers – often both – in an institutional shift that has been dubbed the “quiet revolution” (Figure 1.1) (Caciagli and Di Virgilio 2005; Campbell 2003). Hence, the dynamics of municipal politics cannot be reduced to a reflection of national-level politics – on the contrary, demographic and institutional trends suggest that national-level politics might become increasingly subject to dynamics borne out of cities (Evans 2002; Sellers 2002).

In countries with mass parties, it is common for an aspiring mayor to cultivate ties to the higher echelons of politics to obtain the two sources needed to mobilize votes: party endorsement and patronage resources. Yet, the mayoral candidates examined in this book – and in several countries worldwide – no longer see mass parties as able to offer a persuasive ideology, significant resources, or the organizational support needed to win elections. At the same time, the patronage that for decades fueled political support is no longer available, because the soft budgets typical of

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Figure 1.1 Countries in Europe and Latin America that introduced direct mayoral elections and/or expanded mayoral powers in the 1980s and 1990s. *Source:* Author’s elaboration based on data from various sources; nationwide reforms in black, partial reforms in gray.

clientelism have tightened up, especially subsequent to the introduction of Washington Consensus policies and the passage of the Maastricht Treaty. Mayoral candidates in this position must figure out how to relate to the electorate without the benefit of patronage or parties.

This book argues that a new form of politics is taking hold in cities. Subject for decades to entrenched legacies of poor government, patronage, corruption, lack of development, social conflict, and political apathy, cities have made a transition to brand politics. This new approach has broken a vicious cycle of skepticism and inertia and has opened the window for a broad set of reforms. The chapters that follow explain what brand politics is, how it works, and why and how it came about.

In the cities examined herein, the joint presence of direct elections, low levels of party discipline, and high rates of municipal fiscal self-reliance have facilitated the shift to brand politics as a form of public opinion mobilization. Mayors have adapted to the demise of patronage by offering voters a new local collective identity, a new “brand” for the city and its inhabitants. They thus aim to change public minds and to sway voters with a new vision of what it means to be a citizen. Voters who are persuaded, and even energized, by the new vision for the city and themselves

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as its residents are expected to support the candidate at the polls who has articulated and now embodies the brand.

In addition to exploring how mayors react to the decline of parties and fiscal retrenchment, it is necessary also to consider what incentives prompt political actors to set the shift to brand politics in motion and what effects the pursuit of this type of mobilization strategy has. How does brand politics impact the nature of political interaction that follows? How does the shift to brand politics affect the meaning of being a voter and of what voters expect of government? How does it affect policy choice? And what implications does it have for the quality of democracy that ensues? I examine these questions in the remaining chapters.

In anticipation of what follows, let me mention some important implications of the introduction of brand management into politics. First, brand politics further undermines traditional parties, as it supports the emergence of “personal parties,” organizations of political support based on a core vision tightly linked to a specific personality. The resulting new style of political leadership erodes the legitimacy of mass parties at the national level and generates an identification of the voter with the executive that has important repercussions for representation.

Second, the shift to brand politics has a critical impact on policy making. The shift in the logic of political mobilization changes the logic behind project selection and prompts new approaches to developing support for a given project. Understanding how mayors have changed their strategy to mobilize votes helps disentangle the new political game behind policy making.

Third, because brands maximize support by cutting across and thus dislocating previous cleavages of contention, the use of brands deeply affects local politics. Brand politics rests on a broad new meaning of citizenship. Yet, precisely because of its breadth, brand politics undermines the currency held in the political discourse by previous divisions. A critical byproduct of this mobilization approach is the move from a politics of cleavage to a politics of influence. Politics is no longer articulated along oppositions validated by the mutually recognized cleavage that separates them (as in labor-capital or Left-Right). Rather than being about what side one is on, politics becomes about how close one is to a center of influence that embodies the new vision of citizenship. In other words, power radiates from the mayor, who controls the new core political membership. Previously dominant cleavages of contention organized political actors into those “for” and those “against,” providing legitimacy to a broad set of

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perspectives and contenders. But the axes that used to demarcate political discourse are veiled after the shift to brand politics.

This observation helps distinguish brand politicians. Because brands aim to undermine preexisting cleavages, they are typical of politicians who redefine politics through catchall or valence issues. The result is that those who oppose the brand are seen as denying a core collective identity and automatically cast as outsiders, unpatriotic, unconstructive, or obstructionists. This political style is strikingly different from explicitly partisan politics, which is also based on values and ideas but in which it is not unpatriotic to disagree, because cleavages allow the legitimate ideological space for opposition.

The theoretical apparatus developed in this book deploys a parallel between commercial and political branding, because the mayors discussed herein hire and emulate the most daring marketing mavericks. Marketing experts strive to provide stimuli that will induce particular kinds of experiences for consumers, experiences that become part of the notion of a product's overall value. The product, as Schmitt (1999) explains, must be designed to appeal to customers' emotions, engage their senses, stimulate them to think or take action, and encourage them to relate to other people.

Therefore, contemporary marketing no longer considers only material interest when establishing a relationship with customers. It is driven by the notion that consumers are convinced to acquire the product not because of a cost-benefit analysis of the quality-price ratio (as per the old "features and benefits" marketing) but rather because of the values associated with owning it (Holbrook and Hirschman 1993). Veblen anticipated this step decades ago (Veblen and Howells 1965),¹ but it has only recently entered the mainstream (Low and Fullerton 1994). By acquiring the product, consumers aspire to become different people. Brand mayors similarly strive to persuade citizens that by supporting them at the polls, voters will become carriers of the same values – values with which voters are eager to be associated.

Successful brands resonate with the public. As Antanas Mockus, mayor of Bogotá, suggests in the opening epigraph, brands are often based on the ideas that opinion makers have been suggesting in the media. Different candidates use different methods to assess whether an issue or a brand resonates with voters. In the cases examined in this book, methods

¹ I thank the late Charles Tilly for drawing my attention to this connection.

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ranged from consulting elite circles, the media, focus groups, and polls to engaging in participatory politics. The ideas that form the brand are out in the public arena but are not yet *owned* by any political actor. This is important, because the goal of the brand is to tightly associate an idea with a politician.

In this book, brand politics is explored through the comparison of municipal politics in recent decades in Naples, Bogotá, and Chicago. These three cases have been selected not because they prove the theory right but rather because of their theory-generating ability (on this point, see, e.g., Gerring 2004; and Brady and Collier 2004 for a parallel notion of “hypothesis-generating” ability). The three cases vary in socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors, thus offering a broad perspective. Yet they share a past as classic cases of machine politics, and they also display a remarkably similar pattern in how they transitioned to brand politics as a special form of public opinion mobilization.

The analysis draws four main lessons. First, *mayors who engage in brand politics take a new approach to mobilizing citizens around their platforms*. Their interventions amount to a new reform strategy in contexts of political crisis, deep-seated corruption, and chronic underperformance. Mayors in Naples, Bogotá, and Chicago mobilized public support through the construction and communication of a new vision of citizenship aimed inside as well as outside the city. Brands were adapted to each context: A new sense of Neapolitan-ness was launched on the basis of pride in historical cultural heritage to defeat widespread pessimism and passivity and to promote the idea that Naples could be grand again. In Bogotá, citizenship was refocused on civicness, with everyday implications of mutual respect and trust that directly engaged the dramatic problem of security. Being a Chicagoan, finally, turned a traditional politics of ethnic divisiveness on its head by vigorously embracing multiculturalism in lifestyle and entertainment as the solution to postindustrial growth.

These brands led to the depoliticization of previous cleavages (race, class, and party identification) in favor of a citizen generically constructed as a consumer of amenities and public space. Regaining public space became a means of regaining civicness, civic pride, and a sense of belonging. Hence, the three cities shared the same flagship policies, including the development of monumental parks, open cultural events, and public transportation. This policy focus was expressed in a context of fiscal austerity that emphasizes government’s new role as managerial more than political, to the service of all citizens and unencumbered by divisive ideologies.

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Second, *the transition from patronage to public opinion does not imply a transition out of personal politics*. The type of personalism involved in traditional machine politics is one based on direct exchanges of electoral support for selective material incentives. The transition to public opinion politics in the form of brand politics sustained by the passage to direct mayoral elections does not imply an abandonment of personalism. Rather, the locus of power shifts from a street-level network of patrons to a political candidate who broadcasts a message to a large audience, controls media attention, and deploys a political party as a personal electoral apparatus. Personalism reappears, as mayors if successful are indistinguishable from their frames of cultural mobilization. The new visions of what it means to be a Neapolitan, a Bogotano, or a Chicagoan are not institutionalized impersonally. They are indissolubly attached to the mayors who created them. Hence, while these mayors have achieved remarkable and unexpected results, their stories also provide a cautionary tale of elusive representation. In all three cases, strong mayors and feeble parties led to an extreme weakening of city councils – impoverishing a critical branch of local government and the overall democratic debate.

Third, among a variety of institutional features whose influence is examined throughout this book, *the length of terms and possibility of multiple mandates has a particularly striking impact*. The short, nonrenewable terms of Bogotá's mayors are most conducive to limiting the adverse effects of persistent personalism. In contrast, the lack of a term limit in Chicago has led to extreme incumbency powers and control over the local political context. In Naples, the two-term limit has only partially limited the effects of incumbency. In that institutional context, the mayor's simultaneous control of various levels of government has meant that incumbency in the mayoralty translates into incumbency at the provincial and regional levels. In Bogotá, instead, the short grasp of office that is allowed to mayors has softened the impact of their extensive powers and allowed for the development of strong legacies that institutionalize the reform across political contests. It has thus allowed for rather coherent, long-term, and deep reform initiatives to coexist with an alternation in office that sustained mayors' political legitimacy and the quality of representation.

Fourth, *the onset of brand politics can march at different paces*, depending on when the three requirements are present jointly. Changes in the electoral system exercise a jolting effect on the speed of transition from patronage to public opinion politics and on the vigor with which brand politics is undertaken. Bogotá shifted from gubernatorial appointment to

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direct mayoral election. Naples shifted from selection by the city council elected with proportional representation to direct mayoral election. In both cases, the introduction of direct elections destabilized patronage networks and allowed for independent and reformist mayors to enter the political arena. Indeed, in both instances, independents entered politics throughout the country. Chicago is distinct from these two cases, because it lacks major changes in the electoral regime (until the introduction in 1999 of further incumbency-enhancing features). There, direct mayoral elections have been present throughout the period of analysis. Instead, the political machine was undermined by demographic and fiscal changes compounded by externally imposed legislation forbidding patronage appointments. Hence, the case of Chicago shows an alternative path through which machine politics is undermined and the different impact of this path on the dynamics of brand mobilization.

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To fully understand the concept, brand politics should first be set in the context of existing hypotheses about exits from clientelism. Classic works in the literature on clientelism understand it as the product of economic marginalization and advocate increasing local wealth and redistribution in order to break the marginalization syndrome (e.g., see Eisenstadt and Lemarchand 1981; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972; Lande 1973; Allum 1973; Tarrow 1977; and, more recently, Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). Marginalization in this literature is considered primarily in the context of lack of access to economic resources. In other words, arguments based on marginalization indicate that if a threshold in income per capita is met, then clientelism can be undermined, because voters will no longer depend on patrons. There are two problems with this prescription: this strategy is rarely available in disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts; and the case of Naples indicates that, if incentive structures are unchanged, this strategy can be not only ineffectual but also highly counterproductive. Following the 1980 earthquake, Naples for a decade received an exceptional stream of income – mostly by decree and, thus, with no strings attached. Rampant corruption in public works led to a series of “cathedrals in the desert.” By feeding the clientelistic networks, funding reinforced rather than undermined clientelism (Cinquegrani, Fierro, and Pennarola 1990; Barbagallo 1997; Becchi Collida 1992; Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta 1991).

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For other authors, the resource level is taken to influence machine dynamics in the opposite direction. Shefter (1985) argues, for example, that the engine for change is in the political and fiscal crises that clientelistic machines inevitably produce through the mechanisms of “increasing democracy” and “spiraling expenses.” Similarly, Lowi (1964) presents the case of New York City, in which fiscal crises undermined political machines because they prompted the emergence of antiparty and pro-skill movements of reform mobilized by private actors with high stakes in the soundness of the municipal coffers. When in office, leaders of these movements invested in bureaucratic and institutional reforms that machine politicians accepted against the fear of being wiped out by a united opposition – a dynamic Lowi calls “anticipated reaction.”

Yet, clientelism does not necessarily end when patrons come under financial constraints, because the benefits of clientelism are not only monetary (Lemarchand 1981, 22). Not just public spending, subsidies, or control of access to credit enter the flow of patronage resources but also, as Chubb (1981, 74) points out, “discretionary implementation of the powers of licensing and interdiction of local government, particularly in the areas of urban planning, construction licenses and enforcement of zoning and building codes.” This process allows the machine to operate at a remarkably cheap rate of exchange, thus making it more resistant to reform. The fiscal austerity argument proposed by scholars of American political machines *on its own* especially cannot account for the demise of the political machine in Bogotá, where localities received more, not less, funding after the fall of clientelism.

These structural accounts miss an essential trait by explaining the participation of marginal communities in clientelistic politics as a perfectly rational response.² This book argues instead that there is *no such thing as a single rational response*. As Lemarchand (1981, 21) suggests, “Unemployment, though clearly concomitant to marginalization, is not enough to account for the presence of clientelistic control; the important factor is the sociopolitical context of unemployment,” including whether voters-clients *perceive meaningful alternatives* to the use of clientelistic channels for coping with problems of economic survival.

If the perception can be affected, then the rational response will be different. Elderly respondents in Naples’s lower-income neighborhoods

² In the Italian case, the argument that clientelism is the only rational response to given political institutions is most famously made by Pizzorno (1971).

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provide a graphic illustration. These residents consistently explained their abstention from voting by arguing that “nobody *asked me* for my vote.” Such a comment suggests that the members of this group perceived their vote only as a good to be exchanged (or sold). The notion that the vote should represent an opinion on public matters, and hence that the vote has an intrinsic value to voters, rather than to the candidate, was foreign to the respondents. Votes seemed to be understood only as commodities useful to the politician.

This striking instance reminds one that democratic practice does not follow from changes in the electoral institutions alone, but rather it “has to be taught” (Przeworski 1995; Diamond 1999). In other words, it must shape citizen values, preferences, and beliefs. Only then will voters update their perceptions of the political system and, consequently, their behavior. Therefore, an alternative strategy to undermine clientelism calls for a cultural intervention able to change the logic of the political system by influencing actors’ perceptions of the available set of social arrangements.

The innovation of this book is to present a set of cases in which urban reform was not driven by elite progressive coalitions able to undermine party machines through an investment in institutional and bureaucratic infrastructure. Rather, brand politics initiates reform by relying on the direct communication with the electorate of new values, identities, and symbols.

From Exchange to Values through Public Opinion Mobilization

The demise of clientelism via this path requires a change in actors’ perceptions of the political system. In Weberian terms, this shift entails turning the conception of political action from *zweckrational* to *wertrational* – in other words, promoting the distinction between actions driven by social exchange and actions driven by values. Instead of a direct exchange (based on specific concrete benefits, often immediate, individual, and material), politics must be conceived of as an indirect exchange (mediated by social norms) or as the product of ideological conviction. Consequently, an exit from clientelism implies that voters no longer conceive of politicians or bureaucrats as offering services only with the expectation of personal reciprocity (a direct exchange), but rather because transgression would lead to disapproval or sanction by citizens (an indirect exchange) or because the service should be provided for intrinsic (ideological) reasons, regardless of sanctions (Graziano 1976).

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This shift requires the activation of horizontal links among citizens (ex-clients) leading to a mechanism of collective control. In other words, it requires the basis for legitimation to change from resting on individual obligations that lead to personal influence to resting on norms and values, which lead to a collective legitimation of the power of the elected official (Graziano 1976). Such an activation of horizontal links between subordinates expands the sphere of influence of public opinion, effecting what Weber (1946, 226) called “the *leveling of the governed* in opposition to the ruling and bureaucratically articulated group” (emphasis added). With his reference to leveling, Weber pinpoints something essential in overcoming clientelism. Under clientelism, the political system is characterized by a particularistic logic that is doubly personal. Both the patron and the client are specific individuals. Instead, Weber is calling for democracy based on institutional authority, in which neither the citizen nor the officeholder is viewed as a personal figure; rather, each is seen as institutional. In particular, the public comprises not single voters who are identified for favors but an indistinct collectivity.

The political candidate sees voters as a collectivity, and voters are aware of this. Hence, voters see their relationship with the political candidate in much the same way. This direct but impersonal relationship is at the heart of public opinion democracy, a political system of mobilization founded on public opinion about public matters. Public opinion democracy thus requires a two-level operation. First, it requires the development of public opinion, in the sense of respondents expressing their views by virtue of their conscious membership in a collectivity. Second, to bring about political reform, public opinion must concern public matters. This requires citizens to construct the notion of a given matter as public, which is by no means obvious.³ The characteristics of public opinion mobilization versus clientelistic mobilization are summarized in Table 1.1. Politicians attend to the discrete interests of voters in clientelism but the broad interests of their constituency if they face public opinion settings. The resulting technology deployed for the mobilization of consensus is a pyramidal structure based on particularistic benefits when votes are exchanges, but the technology relies on mass communication of collective benefits when votes are won through opinion. Because of the different technologies, the

³ The proverbial attitudes of Neapolitans viewing public space as either belonging to no one or available to anyone for private use, as embodied in the phenomenon of illegal parking attendants, reveals the difficulty of this hurdle.