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Accountability, Democracy, and the Study of Clientelism

Stepping off the bus on the main road in Campo Santo, a small, impoverished municipality in Argentina's northwest, it is not difficult to find the town's social welfare office. The office is prominently located near the main entrance to the municipality and, more importantly, identifiable by the sizable crowd of residents waiting outside. The crowd is made up mostly of women, many with small children, joined by a few elderly men. Various staff members from the social welfare office are present, but only a top bureaucrat in the office, Liliana, actually attends to the crowd.[1] The type of requests residents make vary widely: as I arrived on one occasion, an older man asked for help paying for a prescription, while later in the morning a mother came by to pick up a mattress she had recently requested so that her daughter could move out of their shared bed.

These benefits, along with others that Liliana distributes, are funded by the government – municipal, provincial, or federal. However, the treatment beneficiaries receive in Campo Santo is both personal and politicized. Liliana's desk is crowded with photos of herself with the mayor, the governor, and the lieutenant governor. Above her chair hangs a hand-drawn portrait of Juan and Eva Perón, the icons of Argentina's largest political party, the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ), to which both Liliana and the mayor belong. Even more importantly, Liliana treats the distribution of social benefits as a tool for garnering electoral support – one she believes is extremely effective. She described the response of voters to the receipt of social program benefits this way: "At the moment of the vote, it doesn't matter if they're from the other party, they go 'tac' and they vote for the mayor." Campo Santo's mayor also emphasized the importance of individualized exchange in the pursuit of votes.

[1] To protect interviewee anonymity, I have changed the names of all nonelected interviewees throughout the book.

In his words, "The typical resident is very clientelist ... it's not the best way, but you have to do it."

The municipality of Devoto, in the relatively prosperous bread belt province of Córdoba, seems at first glance vastly different from Campo Santo. Devoto has a low poverty rate and a long tradition of support for Argentina's century-old Radical party, or UCR.[2] At the time of my research, the mayor had just begun his fourth term in office after an election in which the opposition Peronist party did not even present a candidate for mayor. Given the town's relative affluence, the social welfare office did not present the crowded scene described in Campo Santo. Nonetheless, an interview with Graciela, a social worker who held a top position in the town's social welfare office, revealed that the provision of social benefits was highly politicized in Devoto. Graciela was frank about her frustration with how the beneficiary list for a large food distribution program was compiled and maintained. She described how she would like to "clean" the beneficiary list of those not most in need of the benefits, but that the mayor's resistance meant she was unable to do so.[3] Similarly, when asked who had the final say regarding inclusion into the beneficiary list for this program, Graciela's answer reflected the strong influence of political considerations. In her words, the final say over any individual's inclusion would be the result of a dispute between her "professional" criteria and the mayor's "political" criteria. In her own assessment, sometimes the mayor "won" this dispute, while at other times she prevailed.[4]

These brief examples suggest that, in spite of the differences between these towns, political figures in both Campo Santo and Devoto rely on clientelism – the individualized exchange of goods and services for political support – in the implementation of social policy. In doing so, they are not alone; by many accounts, clientelism is an extremely common form of policy implementation in Argentina. However, although contingent, individualized exchange may be the dominant approach to social policy administration in Argentina's towns and cities, it is not the only approach.

About an hour and a half drive from Devoto, the municipality of Río Primero is situated in a similar agricultural zone and enjoys similarly low rates of poverty. At the time of my research, it, too, had a Radical party mayor, although he faced a more competitive electoral environment than his counterpart in Devoto. And in Río Primero, too, a licensed social worker, Carolina, was in a top position at the social welfare office. However, her experience in that office forms a sharp contrast with that of Graciela. In Carolina's words, she and her staff were "not at all ordered around" by the

[2] The UCR, or *Union Cívica Radical*, is in fact not a radical party at all, but a catch-all party founded in the late nineteenth century. It fielded six presidents over the course of the twentieth century and was long the second-largest political force in Argentina, although its fortunes have suffered dramatically since a Radical party president resigned from office in the midst of an economic and political crisis in 2001.

[3] Author interview, August 2007.

[4] Research assistant interview, August 2006.

mayor or other political staff in their administration of social programs. She described her office as "very independent" of political considerations. The mayor's own attitude echoed that of Carolina. He claimed to scrupulously avoid using social assistance as a political tool, instead preferring to "let those that want to vote for us . . . without any type of exchange."

Uneven Democracy

The experience of these three small Argentine towns reflects two persistent puzzles of the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1991).[5] In the first place, democratic endurance or consolidation has not meant convergence to an ideal-type high-quality democracy. Second, the quality of democracy varies substantially within, as well as across, countries.

Across the world, examples abound of both disappointing democratic performance and subnational variation in that performance. In Eastern Europe, for example, though some new democracies successfully reformed the state inherited from Communist rulers, in others, newly elected officials looted state coffers and weakened state institutions.[6] In Latin America, many of the third wave democracies have come to be characterized as "delegative democracies," wherein once elected, a president enjoys almost free rein to govern as he sees fit – or as best benefits him personally (O'Donnell, 1994). The uneven quality of government performance across subnational units in many new democracies is well established (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006c). Brazil's states and municipalities, for example, vary widely in their performance in areas ranging from the provision of basic health care services to extrajudicial killings by the police.[7] Nor is this type of subnational variation limited to the third-wave democracies or the developing world: examples from India to Italy point to the possibility of persistent unevenness in democratic performance within a single state.[8]

Fundamentally, this book is motivated by a desire to shed light on these two puzzles by identifying the conditions under which citizens are most likely to be able to hold local politicians accountable. In other words, what explains variation in the quality of governance *within* democracy? I answer this question through a subnational study of political clientelism. Clientelism, or the individualized exchange of goods or services for political support, undermines a citizen's ability to use her political actions to signal her political preferences or to hold politicians to account. As such, the costs of clientelism for governance are widely recognized. Nonetheless, the literature has paid less attention to

5 Both were first brought to widespread attention by Guillermo O'Donnell. See especially O'Donnell (1993) and O'Donnell (1996).
6 See Grzymala-Busse (2007), Hellman (1998), and O'Dwyer (2006).
7 Alves (2012) and Gibson (2012) discuss the former, and see Brinks (2008) on the latter.
8 On India, some recent work includes that by Bussell (2010) and Singh (2010). Works by Judith Chubb, Miriam Golden, and Robert Putnam all point to substantial subnational variation in the quality of Italian government performance.

the links between clientelism and within country variation in the quality of governance. While some countries are monolithic clientelist regimes and others have eliminated clientelism entirely, there is a vast middle ground between these two extremes. This book speaks to those cases in which there is no national-level imperative to reduce clientelism, yet local conditions sometimes create incentives for politicians to eschew clientelistic relationships on their own. By identifying those conditions, a study of clientelism can serve as an apt lens through which to understand paths to accountability within democracy.

Returning to the Argentine context, all three municipalities described in the opening paragraphs are the site of regular national and local elections that are open to interparty competition and take place without violence, ballot stuffing, or overt violations of civil or political rights. Within Argentina, there has been no nationally led attempt to eliminate clientelism from the repertoire of local politicians' appeals to citizens. Yet, at the time of the research for this book, important variation existed. In two of these municipalities – one mostly poor, and one predominantly middle class – mayors relied on clientelism in the implementation of social policy, while in the third municipality, the mayor did not. In a context where clientelism is widespread, it is this second decision – of some politicians to opt *out* of clientelism – that merits particular attention. If we are able to explain this case and others like it, we may be able to illuminate a possible pathway out of clientelism and toward improved local governance in Argentina and elsewhere.

In this book, I argue that it is the combination of high levels of political competition and a large middle class that leads some local incumbents to opt out of clientelism. This argument builds on, yet departs from, two longstanding schools of thought about the determinants of good governance. Modernization theorists since Seymour Martin Lipset have pointed to growing prosperity as crucial for changing citizen preferences and the nature of their demands on government, and thus for achieving good government performance.[9] An equally long trajectory points to the importance of competition – in the form of democracy or within a democracy – for prompting politicians to deliver results to citizens.[10]

I develop the argument that, from the perspective of understanding departures from clientelism, neither condition alone will suffice. This is because of a feature of clientelism that has received little attention to this date: clientelism creates an electoral tradeoff in terms of support from different groups of constituents. That is, though clientelism can lead to increased political support from the poor, it is likely to decrease political support from the nonpoor.[11] The existence of this tradeoff means that, when voters are mostly poor,

[9] See Lipset (1959) and Moore (1966) for classic formulations.
[10] See Schumpeter (2012 [1943]). This approach also draws on insights from economics; see, for example, Barro (1973), Downs (1957), and Ferejohn (1986).
[11] Whereas the former is broadly recognized, the latter observation has received very little attention, though see Banfield and Wilson (1963), Shefter (1977), and Brusco et al. (2006).

high competition can actually strengthen an incumbent's interest in relying on clientelism. This is the opposite of what proponents of the benefits of competition for good governance would expect. At the same time, the mere existence of a large middle class that dislikes clientelism will not necessarily create sufficient incentives for incumbents to move away from clientelism. Limited political competition can insulate incumbents from citizen preferences. It is only when high competition coincides with a large nonpoor population that we should expect incumbents to eschew clientelism. This is especially true for incumbents from parties that normally rely on middle-class support. Under those circumstances, incumbents will both face high costs to clientelism and be motivated to react to those costs by moving away from clientelism.

Employing a subnational comparative approach, I test this theory of clientelism using individual-level and municipal-level data from Argentina. The combination of field observation, a survey of key informants in a sample of more than 125 municipalities, and a mass survey and survey experiment provides an unusually detailed picture of how clientelism works, the attitudes of nonclients toward the practice, and the conditions under which local politicians opt not to rely on it. I provide evidence that the *interaction* between political competition and constituency poverty – particularly in certain partisan environments – is crucial for understanding why some local politicians in Argentina depart from clientelism, thus opening the door to improved governance.

1.1 CLIENTELISM, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND DEMOCRACY

When talking about the quality of government, scholars have a variety of concrete behaviors and measures in mind, ranging from the quality of basic service delivery, to government efficiency in responding to citizens, to the politicization of the civil service, to the control of corruption.[12] This book focuses on clientelism as a practice that directly undermines links of accountability between citizens and those who govern.

1.1.1 Defining Clientelism

Throughout this book, I define clientelism as the *individualized, contingent exchange of goods or services for political support or votes*.[13] My definition

[12] See Cleary (2010), Min (2010), Putnam (1994), Bussell (2010), Geddes (1994), Grzymala-Busse (2007), O'Dwyer (2006), and Adserá et al. (2003) for some examples.

[13] Strictly speaking, this is a definition of the practice of political clientelism. Earlier definitions of clientelism within the social sciences emphasized that the practice was embedded in social ties and encompassed the exchange of a broad range of services and support between patrons and clients, which were not necessarily political in nature (Scott, 1972, Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984). Increases in urbanization, economic development, and the salience of competitive politics in much of the developing world eventually led scholars to shift their attention to examining how these exchange relationships functioned within the context of competitive politics. As early as 1968, Weingrod stated that "patronage in the anthropologists' sense [i.e., about interpersonal relationships] appears to be increasingly a historical phenomenon, while

hews quite closely to an emerging consensus on the definition of clientelism in the most recent wave of writing on the topic.[14] Clientelism is thus distinguished by the *simultaneously* individualized and contingent nature of distribution. By individualized, I mean that clientelism's benefits are targeted at the individual voter, rather than at members of a certain group.[15] By contingent, I mean that in clientelist exchange, a voter's expected utility is tied to her individual political behavior: she believes that she can lose access to valued goods or services if she fails to support a clientelist incumbent.[16]

The term "clientelism" is sometimes used interchangeably with the words "patronage" and "vote-buying."[17] In this book, I define vote-buying as temporally limited to the exchange of small goods in the period immediately surrounding elections.[18] If voters fear their political behavior can be learned, then vote-buying is best considered a subtype of clientelism. If, on the other hand, neither citizens nor politicians expect to be able to identify or punish defectors, vote-buying is better understood as a form of campaigning.[19] I use the term patronage to refer to the exchange of public sector employment for political support or votes.[20] Both patronage and vote-buying can thus be considered subsets of clientelism, and I use this latter term throughout the book.

patronage in the political science sense [specific exchange for political support] becomes more relevant to contemporary issues" (Weingrod, 1968, 381).

14 See, for example, definitions proposed by Chandra (2004), Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007a), Piattoni (2001a), and Stokes (2009). For a similar conceptualization of the differences between clientelism and other forms of distributive politics, see especially Stokes et al. (2013).

15 Some definitions of clientelism include distribution to small groups. If groups are sufficiently small and voters continue to believe that access depends on their individual votes, clientelism is certainly plausible in this setting. Given the difficulty of establishing the relevant group size a priori, I prefer a definition that focuses on individuals alone.

16 Another school of thought in the literature on clientelism suggests that reciprocity, rather than coercion or fear, explains compliance with clientelist exchanges (Finan and Schechter, 2012, Lawson and Greene, 2013). Feelings of reciprocity undoubtedly help explain voting behavior in many settings. However, if reciprocity alone explains voter behavior when individuals receive targeted benefits, it will be hard to distinguish clientelism from constituency service or other noncontingent forms of individualized distribution. Research by Auyero (2000a,b) in Argentina suggests that reciprocity and fear frequently work together to help enforce the clientelist bargain. Given the difficulty of distinguishing these psychological mechanisms, I characterize clientelism as working largely through fear throughout this book. However, the theory of variation in clientelism developed in the chapters that follow does not hinge on this conceptualization.

17 Some differences in usage are due to linguistic heritage, with "patronage" more common in the Anglophone world, while "clientelism" appears in the Romance languages (Piattoni, 2001a).

18 Stokes (2009) and Schaffer (2007b) also make this distinction.

19 For a discussion of this debate in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, see Kramon (2011).

20 Other scholars have used a similar definition in work with a focus on the North American and European historical experience (Key, 1949, Shefter, 1977, Folke et al., 2011), as well as in some more recent empirical work on Latin America (Geddes, 1994, Gordin, 2002, Kemahlioglu, 2006) and Eastern Europe (O'Dwyer, 2006).

While clientelism may encompass vote-buying and patronage, it is analytically distinct from two other common forms of distributive politics: "pork barrel" politics and constituency service. Pork barrel politics is generally defined as the geographically concentrated distribution of benefits, where the costs are borne by the polity at large. These targeted redistributive benefits can of course be a useful political tool, and there is plentiful evidence that democratically elected politicians use geographically targeted spending to reward faithful constituencies in contexts from Brazil to Italy to the United States.[21] When politicians promise pork to reward their supporters, they are in effect making the distribution of government funds contingent on district level behavior. However, even when the delivery of pork is linked to a group's voting behavior, it cannot be made contingent on the vote choice of an individual within that group.[22]

Constituency service is the distribution of nonmonetary services, in particular facilitating access to the bureaucracy, to citizens on an individualized basis. Constituency service is generally understood to be open to all comers, and it does not carry with it expectations (or implicit threats) that assistance is linked to an individual's political identity or behavior.[23] Instead, constituency service works fundamentally by "generating goodwill among constituents who receive assistance" (Stokes, 2009, 11). Constituency service can have deleterious effects on the quality of government: for example, incumbent politicians who rely heavily on the practice for their reelection prospects might come to benefit from fostering bureaucratic inefficiency.[24] Nonetheless, constituency service (like pork) fundamentally works to get votes in the same way as any other broad-based policy proposal or position – by persuasion.[25]

[21] On Brazil, see Pereira and Renno (2003) (though see Samuels (2002) for a different view). On Italy, see Golden and Picci (2008), and Ansolabehere and Snyder (2006) illustrate this phenomenon in the United States.

[22] If that degree of contingency is possible, then clientelism, rather than pork, is a more accurate description. Some literature discusses the phenomenon of "vote banks," wherein politicians give benefits to local elites, who then in turn deliver the votes of a bloc of loyal voters (Bailey, 1963). To the extent that voters believe that future access to benefits depends on their individual voting behavior, we can think of this as "mediated clientelism," a subtype of clientelism wherein local elites capture most of the benefits. If voters receive no benefits at all for their votes, we should instead think of this practice as coercion, rather than an exchange.

[23] When these favors are granted conditional on political support, constituency service then crosses the line into clientelism. This may be the case for Italy – see Golden (2003). On the other hand, some relationships frequently referred to as clientelism may be closer to constituency service (see Baldwin [2013] on Zambia). The fact remains that beliefs about contingency are in the eye of the beholder, which is part of what makes clientelism so difficult to measure.

[24] On the U.S. case, see Fiorina and Noll (1978).

[25] As such, both practices thus fall squarely into the category of programmatic politics. Programmatic linkages include a diverse group of practices that run the gamut from the implementation of universal welfare programs to enacting policies that serve "rent-seeking special interests" (Kitschelt, 2000, 850).

In sum, all three practices – clientelism, pork, and constituency service – may be seen in some way as deviations from an ideal model of politics in which politicians would gain support wholly by advocating the rules-based implementation of policies that benefit the "general interest."[26] Nonetheless, clientelism's singular combination of individual targeting and contingency means that it has unique implications for governance and the nature of accountability relationships between citizens and politicians.

1.1.2 Governance and Accountability

Scholars have focused on two main dimensions of government performance: responsiveness and effectiveness.[27] A responsive government is one that "adopts policies that are signaled as preferred by citizens" (Manin et al., 1999, 9). In other words, responsiveness refers to whether the content of policies matches the substantive preferences of citizens. Effectiveness, on the other hand, refers to whether policies, regardless of their content, are carried out efficiently and effectively.[28] This is more likely to be a valence issue among citizens because irrespective of policy preferences, the vast majority of citizens will want policies carried out without favoritism, waste, or graft.[29]

The existence of strong ties of accountability between citizens and those who govern is crucial for achieving good governance along both these dimensions. When accountability relationships are strong, citizens will be able to differentiate governments that implement desired policies in an efficient manner from those that do not, and then, in the crucial step, reward or punish those governments as appropriate.[30] A politician's knowledge that he can be held accountable for his performance creates incentives for him to be both responsive and effective.

If we accept that strong accountability relationships are crucial for good governance, this then raises the question of what explains the strength of

[26] As Piattoni (2001a, 3) states, this is an idealized vision of politics, and even if it were possible to discern the general interest, all democracies cater at least in part to particularistic interests.

[27] See Putnam (1994, 63).

[28] In a number of works, Putnam (1973, 1994) uses the term effectiveness interchangeably with "bureaucratic responsiveness." I employ the former because it more readily encompasses practices like corruption, and it allows us to acknowledge that politicians, not only bureaucrats, can influence how public policies are carried out.

[29] Of course, in some cases, a citizen may prefer that an exception be made to a given policy if that exception will favor her. Nonetheless, if she would condemn that same exception if made for others, this suggests a preference, at least in principle, for the "fair" implementation of policy.

[30] See also Przeworski et al. (1999) and the definition of "electoral accountability" advanced by Mainwaring (2003). In the words of Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, accountability requires that citizens can "discern representative from unrepresentative governments," and "sanction them appropriately" (Przeworski et al., 1999, 10).

those relationships. Democracy itself is perhaps the most obvious answer.[31] There are many reasons to expect that leaders are more readily held to account within democracies as opposed to other types of regimes. The very definition of accountability requires that politicians can be sanctioned if they do not act in the interest of citizens. Democratic elections institutionalize the communication of preferences and provide a natural opportunity for citizens (at minimal risk or cost to themselves) to exact such a sanction if they so choose.

While admitting that democracy can facilitate accountability, it is a premise of this book that democracy is not sufficient to ensure that citizens can effectively hold leaders to account.[32] There are a number of conditions under which citizens' ability to distinguish good from bad government or to sanction poor performance might be disrupted, even in a well-functioning democracy. At the individual level, learning about the actions of government may be made difficult by lack of political interest or knowledge. Geographic isolation or a sparse media environment can limit access to information, even among those who seek it out. Even where individuals (and the media) are heavily invested in acquiring (and disseminating) information about government performance, a government's actions and motivations are not directly observable. As in a classic principal–agent problem, it is difficult for a citizen to know if a bad outcome is the result of poor decisions taken by the government or by exogenous shocks.[33]

Though some slippage in accountability may be unavoidable, even in a democracy, in other cases, politicians actively engage in practices that are designed to undermine accountability and responsiveness. For example, the practice of using official publicity to reward newspapers allied with the government and punish opposition news sources (Open Society Institute, 2005, Brown, 2011) seeks directly to shape the information citizens have available to evaluate incumbents. Similarly, when national leaders weaken independent auditing or ombudsman offices (Wrong, 2009), they aim to disrupt the flow of unbiased information to citizens. The focus of this book is clientelism – a practice that, at the local level, undermines citizens' ability to act on their judgments of incumbent politicians.

[31] See discussions in Manin et al. (1999, 4) and Powell (2004, 92).

[32] Although not the focus of this book, it is also the case that accountability can be achieved without democracy. Even in the absence of free and fair elections, political leaders may face moral pressures to perform well or fear the sanction of citizens not at the ballot box, but in the streets. For compelling examples of how some measure of accountability can be achieved in nondemocratic contexts, see Tsai (2007) on China and Reinikka and Svensson (2005) on Uganda.

[33] Empirically, phenomena such as persistent corruption (Lambsdorff, 2006), widespread criminality among democratically elected politicians (Della Porta, 2001, Golden and Chang, 2001, Golden and Tiwari, 2009, Vaishnav, 2012), and the reversal of mandates (Stokes, 2001) all illustrate the possibility that democratic government can fail to be responsive or efficacious.

1.1.3 How Clientelism Undermines Accountability

A key requirement of accountability is that a citizen's assessment of the performance of those in power is reflected in her political behavior, including her vote. Clientelism threatens that requirement by reducing the issue space in which some citizens act to the question of access to individualized goods. When clientelism works, citizens believe that their access to highly valued goods is contingent on their *individual* political behavior. When this is the case, the desire to maintain access may become the overwhelming determinant of the vote and other political behavior. As a result, an individual's ability to use her political voice to express her preferences on a government's overall performance will be sharply curtailed.[34] Clientelism in a sense forces clients to become single-issue political actors, and the votes that clients cast "carry little information about their interests" (Stokes, 2007a, 90).[35]

From a normative perspective, we need not be alarmed if some citizens in a democracy make political decisions based on a single issue alone. When undertaken willingly, single-issue voting is not in and of itself detrimental to accountability. However, in the case of clientelism, the belief that access to valued goods can be tied to individual behavior casts doubt on whether such votes are fully free. Clientelism creates a fear of being punished for individual political behavior, and this fear makes possible scenarios where voters might overwhelmingly prefer a challenger and yet continue to vote for an incumbent, thus keeping the latter in power.[36]

By weakening accountability, clientelism is also likely to undermine government responsiveness and effectiveness. Manin et al. (1999, 9) note that responsiveness "is predicated on the prior emission of messages by citizens." When citizens vote, campaign, or turn out at rallies for a clientelist politician, it may be said that they are sending messages that they support his policies and perhaps even the practice of clientelism itself. At the same time, clientelism can lead citizens to take these political actions to maintain access to some valued good, regardless of their views of clientelism or public policy. Considered in this light, the message that clients appear to be sending might be quite different from that they would like to send. If clientelism can coexist with responsiveness, it is surely a diminished form of responsiveness.

Further, by diminishing policy responsiveness to clients, clientelism will thereby increase the relative policy responsiveness to other groups of citizens.

34 In fact, Stokes (2005) argues that clientelism actually makes citizens accountable to a clientelist politician for the former's political behavior – she calls this "perverse accountability."

35 Such a vote does, of course, communicate the client's interest in maintaining access to the good. However, the link to individual behavior makes that interest paramount above all others, potentially changing the weight citizens might otherwise attach to various aspects of government performance.

36 I elaborate on this type of scenario in my discussion of the individual client's calculus in Chapter 2. See also Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2003) for a model of this dynamic with reference to Mexico under the PRI (the *Partido Revolucionario Institutional*).