

Principled Principals?

Voter Responses to Public Goods Provision

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Abstract

Do voters in developing democracies reward incumbents for public goods provision? One of the basic assumptions of democratic theory is that voters use elections to punish and reward incumbents for their performance in office. However, many accounts characterize elections in developing democracies as being dominated by clientelism and vote buying, suggesting that voters do not base their vote on public service provision. This dissertation proposes a somewhat more optimistic picture. The results highlight that voters in developing democracies are willing to reward their representatives for effective public goods provision. However, the findings also suggest that societies can be trapped in an electoral equilibrium with low public goods provision because voters have pessimistic expectations about the effectiveness of public goods policies and are not able to attribute public goods outcomes to the efforts of their representatives. While pessimistic expectations lead voters to not reward incumbents for investment in public goods policies when outcomes are uncertain, failure of attribution leads to low electoral returns even for effective public goods provision. Policy instruments that assign responsibilities to politicians during policy implementation can increase attributability by enabling incumbents to credibly claim credit for public service provision or by making politicians' efforts observable to voters.

Key Words: Public Goods Provision, Electoral Accountability, Voting Behavior