

Clients of God

Exploring how hierarchical religious bonds shape political behaviour

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Abstract

One of the perennial questions of political science is how people decide which candidate to vote for. In the context of developing democracies one dominant explanation is clientelism, where clients sell their votes in exchange for a material good to the highest bidder. In short, citizens are understood to be motivated by material benefits when casting their votes. What remains largely absent from the contemporary political science scholarship is a theory of clientelism that can explain why client-voters may be swayed by non-material goods when they cast their vote – that is an understanding that goes beyond the economic lens of the material exchange, but an exchange that is simultaneously economic, political, ritual, and moral.

This dissertation expands our understanding of clientelism to include the exchange of non-material goods, via religion. It does so by exploring how religion shapes clientelism. The project is set up in two parts. The first part develops an inductive theory of religious clientelism. Here the exchange takes place between voters and politicians both of whom play dual roles: patrons are both living saint and politician, and clients are both followers of and voters for these patrons. The exchange is centred on non-material incentives. Unlike the marketised model of clientelism, religious clientelism allows the inclusion of context and social identities of citizens as part of their calculus when casting their vote. The theory is undergirded by data collected through semi-structured interviews with voters in the Pakistani provinces of Punjab and Sindh. I argue that voters who share religious hierarchical bonds with candidates prefer non-material religious rewards in the clientelistic exchange with their patrons. This is rooted in the dual role that religion plays for clients – both as a social identity and individual belief system. The theory argues that when hierarchical clientelistic bonds are rooted in religion clients are driven by the believer's rationality, which finds utility in non-material religious goods. It is this role of religion that enables non-material goods to be part of their calculus in the political sphere. The findings highlight the hierarchical religious bond as the driver of voters' political behaviour in terms of voting and partisanship, where clients vote for the patron-saint and follow them across partisan lines if the patron were to change political party.

The second part of the project substantiates the theory with an in-depth case study of Sufi saint-politicians and their disciple-voters in Pakistan. I provide a bottom-up analysis of voter preferences, with the original contribution of *non-material religious goods* to the clientelism scholarship. I also provide a top-down analysis of the political behaviour of patron-saints. I illustrate how the religious position of patrons provides them advantages in the political sphere relative to non-saint politicians, and how this reinforces their positions as powerholders. These advantages include their access to a steady votebank, organisational infrastructure, and access to non-material goods. I tease out the mechanisms that undergird the political behaviour of both actors, illustrating the multifaceted role of religion as both social identity and belief system. Combining insights from an original database of Sufi saint-politicians in the National and Provincial Assemblies and fieldwork (including semi-structured and elite interviews, and participant observation), this study is the first to gather original empirical data on this subset of voters.

Key Words: Clientelism, political behaviour, religion, South Asia, interviews, fieldwork, patron-client, non-material goods, Pakistan, Sufi, Islam