



How Patronage-Oriented Party Systems Weaken Democratic Government and Distort Economic Growth

Clara Alexandra Volintiru, Bucharest University of Economic Studies and London School of Economics and Political Science

Many citizens in Europe and the United States believe that the quality of democracy has declined over the last few decades. Political cartelization and patronage-oriented styles of governance can help explain how parties collude to survive as public debates narrow and the grassroots bases of parties wither. Global development ties national economics increasingly together and reduces the space for parties to shape national policies. In this situation, national parties may become less distinguishable and form a kind of elite cartel increasingly cut off from democratic support and accountability. Salient popular grievances can grow without being addressed or sometimes even recognized by established parties. This growing distance and the lack of substantive connection to citizens they attempt to govern, makes cartel parties ineffective and vulnerable, unless they build webs of patron-client ties to ensure loyalty from lower-level leaders and particular citizens who gain benefits.

New European democracies – such as those that formed out of the collapse of the former Soviet Union-- have followed especially interesting trajectories that can be analyzed in terms of this perspective.

Telling Developments in Europe's New Democracies

Despite being unstable after formative transitions, our research shows that new European party systems have remained relatively stable for decades. This is surprising because at the time of their emergence these new parties had few local roots, experienced a lot of electoral volatility, and had to maneuver while new legislative and institutional arrangements were put in place.

Nevertheless, the subsequent stability in new European systems can be explained by two processes. First, established party cartels took hold in the face of organizational challenges, as parties survived by colluding and leveraging the state's resources to entrench their positions, better their chances of re-election, and maintain joint power. But even as cartelization stabilizes parties, it also exposes them to unique threats. Outside opponents can arise to challenge the cartel parties, or else leaders from the lower party ranks can detach themselves from loyalties to higher-ups and launch challenges.

Another process – patronage distributions of goods and services -- can still ensure the survival of cartel parties by embedding them in webs of patron-client ties. Such webs form when party leaders exchange goods or services for political support from many operatives and intermediate brokers. This exchange of goods and services for political support can prevent lower-level defections and compensate for the party's weak or poorly developed roots in society.

Implications for the Quality of Governance

There are intrinsic links between the quality of democracy and the quality of governance in democratic countries. When the quality of government declines or is weak from the start, as in many post-communist democracies, clientalism gains appeal. Through informal exchanges, citizens get access goods and services they otherwise lack or cannot get in a timely manner from feeble or corrupt government agencies. In turn, the proliferation of special corrupt deals further corrodes state capacities – and at the same time undermines democratic accountability.

- **Political relationships are inverted.** Cartelization and the informal resource flows disengage political parties and their leaders from voters and external civic groups. By spreading access to government resources through conditional bargains, clientalism turns both lower-level party leaders and external

beneficiaries into agents of the individual politicians who spread largesse in return for electoral support.

- ***The social contract becomes void of meaning.*** In a context where this type of political cartelization is widespread, citizens lose voice and leverage, ceding control to the political elites who are able to fuel informal exchanges. Personal relationships start to structure all political and social interactions. The electoral process is no longer driven by accountability and representativeness, but by promises of particular benefits to be delivered to those who turn out supporters. In contexts of rising inequality and deepening economic disparities, such informal exchanges can become appealing to many people struggling to survive or get ahead.
- ***Clientalistic exchanges play an essential role in connecting cartel parties to the electorate.*** By developing or maintaining roots in society for party organizations, clientalistic exchanges can ensure their long-term survival. Yet in the absence of large-scale, inclusive redistributive policies, cartel parties lose their grassroots presence over time. Even when patron-client linkages fail to deliver electoral victories, they nevertheless fill the party's grassroots presence; given local party chieftains leverage these linkages continue to obtain supporters' loyalty through conditional benefits.

Political systems enmeshed in clientalistic webs can be regarded as a low quality, yet functional form of democratic representation. Informal exchanges can be viewed as compensation for weaknesses of public administration in these systems. Nevertheless, patron-client arrangements, once entrenched, prevent improvements in governance. Informal exchanges reach out into society, compensating for the weak grassroots ties typical of cartel parties. In clientalistic democracies at least some publicly amassed resources make their way back to citizens. But in the absence of stable linkages between state and society mediated by representative parties, these democracies are unstable and vulnerable to takeover by authoritarian leaders.

Economic development is also distorted by extensive systems of public graft, especially in fledgling democracies where graft coexists with economic liberalizations benefitting big companies and rich elites. Without broad social programs to spread opportunity and security to most citizens as the economy develops, ruling patronage-oriented parties face growing incentives to turn social services, public procurement, and state-owned enterprises into reservoirs from which preferential favors can be distributed piecemeal. Healthy growth and a balanced social contract between citizens and elected officials cannot take hold in these circumstances.

Read more in Clara Volintiru, "**The Exploitative Function of Party Patronage: Does it Serve the Party's Interest?**" *East European Politics*, 31, no. 1 (2015): 39-55 and Sergiu Gherghina and Clara Volintiru, "**A New Model of Clientelism: Political Parties, Public Resources, and Private Contributors**" *European Political Science Review*, 9, no. 1 (2017): 115-137.