



WIDER Working Paper 2021/138

Social ties, clientelism, and the poor's expectations of future service provision

Receiving more, expecting less?

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August 2021

Abstract: Are candidates who hand out clientelistic goods at election time less likely to provide services once they take office? This paper examines the poor’s expectations of future service provision by candidates who hand out money and other goods versus those who do not. We hypothesize that the poor’s expectations should depend on the density of social ties. To test this hypothesis, we use hierarchical models to analyse observational data and two conjoint experiments embedded in a unique survey of Kenyans, Malawians, and Zambians. The heavily clustered sampling design allows the investigation of community- and individual-level factors, while the large sample size allows us to focus on a subsample of over 14,000 poor respondents. In socially dense communities, we find that monetary handouts signal the candidate’s ability to provide future services; in less socially dense areas, such handouts appear to be viewed as in lieu of future services. Greater information flows in socially dense communities may help poor voters to monitor candidates and hold them accountable. It is important to consider how communities’ experiences with clientelism affect expectations of service provision. Development practitioners need to understand how social context affects not only the likelihood of vote-buying but also the distributive effects of clientelism.

Key words: vote-buying, clientelism, social ties, poverty, service provision

Acknowledgements: The authors gratefully acknowledge Cecilia Ahsan Jansson and Erica Metheny, who provided constructive comments, data-cleaning, and assistance with data analysis. They also appreciate the research assistance of Gibran Okar and Isabel Wilson; collaboration on experimental design by Adam Harris and Kristen Kao; partnership in implementing the Local Governance Performance Index from the Programme on Governance and Local Development team; financial support from the Swedish Research Council (‘Social Institutions and Governance: Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa’, 2016-01687, principal investigator Ellen Lust; ‘Recruitment Grant’, E0003801, principal investigator Pam Freeman) and Formas (‘The Governance Challenge of Urbanization’, 2016-00228, principal investigator Ellen Lust). For helpful comments, they thank Ken Opalo and other participants in the UNU-WIDER workshop on clientelism and service provision; Amy Alexander and participants in the Quality of Government conference; and Tina Freyburg and participants in the 2021 European Political Science Association panel ‘Public Goods, Public Bads’. The authors also thank Rose Shaber-Twedt for excellent editorial assistance and Merl Storr for copy-editing.

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This study has been prepared within the UNU-WIDER project [Clientelist politics and economic development – theories, perspectives and new directions](#).

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ISSN 1798-7237 ISBN 978-92-9267-078-8

<https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2021/078-8>

Typescript prepared by Merl Storr.

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The Institute is funded through income from an endowment fund with additional contributions to its work programme from Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as well as earmarked contributions for specific projects from a variety of donors.

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