

Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Clientelism across the public financial management cycle

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The efficient and transparent allocation of public resources is essential for ensuring the adequate provision of essential public services, such as healthcare and education. However, clientelism can distort budgetary processes, leading to inefficiencies, inequitable resource distribution and scarcity in those critical sectors. This Helpdesk Answer explores how clientelism can reduce the level of resourcing of essential public services and the disproportionate impact this can have on groups living in vulnerability.

First, the paper provides a working definition of clientelism and discusses forms of clientelism that can be considered corruption. Next, it analyses the impact of clientelism at different stages of public financial management, from fiscal policy decisions that influence state revenue collection to disparities in the distribution of funds at the point of public service delivery. Throughout, it considers how strategies to secure political support shape public spending decisions. Finally, the paper describes potential measures that could address the ways in which clientelist practices reduce the amount of resources spent on essential public services.

Query

What impact does clientelism have on the resourcing of essential public services?

Main points

- For the purposes of this Helpdesk Answer, clientelism is understood as the discretionary provision of private benefits by government officials and politicians (who control public resources) to specific groups of citizens in exchange for political support (Bardhan 2022) in the context of electoral democracies.
- This is a useful lens through which to examine the distorting effects of patron-client relationships on the resourcing of essential public services, as the quid pro quo exchange of private benefits for political support could partly explain why public service provision to less powerful population groups might be neglected.
- The key distinction between clientelism and other strategies for securing political support in electoral democracies is that benefits are granted solely in exchange for political backing, rather than according to need or public interest, and these benefits can be withdrawn at any time if that support is no longer provided.
- Relationships between patrons and clients can be corrupting, in the sense that once a patron assumes public office, the ties that bind them to their clients may incentivise them to exercise undue influence over the allocation of public resources or even perpetrate acts of corruption to generate funds to buy political support from clients and cronies.
- Clientelism can be described as corruption when public officials abuse the power entrusted to them to allocate state resources in the public interest to instead divert these resources to their political clients as a means of promoting their own interests, which could include political survival and advancement.
- Much of the academic literature on clientelism focuses on its mechanics rather than its consequences. Nonetheless, some of its possible ramifications can be inferred, such as how clientelism can reduce the volume of public resources used to fund essential public services or distort the allocation of these resources in favour of particular groups. Clientelism can lead to distortions at different stages of the public financial management cycle.
- At the resource mobilisation stage, clientelism may encourage decision-makers to adopt fiscal policies that serve the interests of special interest groups, such as tax breaks for certain population groups.
- At the resource allocation stage, clientelism may direct public spending towards sectors and industries more conducive to corrupt practices of self-enrichment, to the detriment of the public interest. Leaders seeking to shore up their sources of political support may allocate considerable public funds to areas like defence or construction in which their allies are better able to extract illicit wealth through rent-seeking, kickbacks, lucrative public contracts and government jobs.
- Notably, in polities characterised by extensive clientelism, patterns of resource

allocation are likely to be highly discretionary, allowing political leaders to respond adroitly to the demands of emerging political constituencies. The need of those in power to secure the support of their political clientele in this manner can affect the resourcing of universal public goods, such as reducing budgets allocated to healthcare and education.

- Clientelist practices at the resource distribution stage can result in essential public services for regions or population groups with strong political connections being better funded relative to services provided to less powerful groups.

- Reducing political clientelism requires combining administrative reforms, transparency initiatives, public awareness campaigns and institutional strengthening. By limiting discretion over resource allocation, increasing public oversight and reducing economic vulnerability, policymakers can create conditions that make clientelist practices less attractive and foster a more programmatic style of politics and ultimately a more equitable political settlement.

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Introduction

The efficient and transparent allocation of public resources is fundamental for the adequate provision of essential public services, such as healthcare and education. Conversely, it has been well documented that corruption can distort budgetary processes, undermine the efficiency of and equality in resource allocation, and ultimately create scarcity in sectors like health and education at the institutional level. The first section of this Helpdesk Answer briefly recaps the distortionary effects corruption can have on public spending.

To date, there has been less focus on how clientelist practices during the public financial management cycle can affect the resourcing of public services. The second section of the paper therefore introduces the concept of clientelism, examines the forms it can take and explores when it could be considered to constitute an act of corruption.

The third section then explores the impact clientelism has during the different phases of the public financial management cycle, from the formulation of fiscal policy to budget execution. It particularly explores how the use of clientelism as a political strategy can shape how money is spent to gain political support, and the impact this can have on the level and targeting of resourcing for essential public services.

The final section offers an overview of possible measures to counteract the more perverse effects of clientelism.

Box 1: Essential public services

Public services is a broad term that encompasses the delivery of goods and services by government entities (or private organisations mandated by the government), and which are chiefly funded by public resources, to serve the needs of the public.

The idea of ‘basic social public services’ or ‘essential public services’ is closely linked to the idea of basic needs, which typically include water, nutrition, shelter, education and healthcare (Gough 2020:2; United Nations – DESA n.d.). These needs have been recognised as universal in the Sustainable Development Goals; as such, each UN member state has a commitment to use its budgetary resources in line with the public interest to meet these basic needs.

Corruption's distortionary effect on public spending

Corruption can have various effects on the allocation of public spending. A study of 48 sub-Saharan African countries found that corrupt practices during budget allocation processes had two effects on public resources. Higher levels of corruption, first, lead to a greater overall level of public spending and, second, are associated with lower spending on certain sectors, like education, but higher spending in other areas in which resources are easier to conceal, like the military (Bazie et al. 2024). These findings corroborated previous studies that showed that countries with higher indices of corruption tended to spend less on social sectors such as education (Mauro 1998:265) but spend more on sectors like law enforcement, energy, culture and defence (Delavallade 2006).

The Bazie et al. study (2024:9) found that an increase of 1 per cent in corruption correlated with an increase of 0.928 per cent in military expenses. This could be the result of corrupt politicians and/or bureaucrats shifting resources to the areas that they consider will provide more and better opportunities for rent-seeking and illicit enrichment (Hessami 2010:1). The authors of the study considered that this could be partly explained by the fact that oversight of military expenditure is often severely limited on grounds of national security, which greatly increases opacity in the use of funds assigned to the defence sector (Bazie et al. 2024, 9). This is consistent with the broader literature: Gupta et al. (2000) have likewise argued that military spending lends itself to acts of corruption and could thus partly explain why some countries with high perceived levels of corruption spend more on the military.

Even once funds have been assigned to a specific sector to deliver public goods, corruption can distort decision-making processes, leading to certain types of spending over others (Tanzi and Davoodi 1997). For example, corrupt officials may favour large investments to construct new infrastructure instead of operating and maintaining existing facilities because new projects offer more lucrative opportunities for self-enrichment for them and their political clientele (Tanzi and Davoodi 1997). This can have knock-on effects on the availability of resources to fund essential public services: money spent on building new hospitals or school buildings cannot be spent on employing teachers and healthcare workers.

Finally, corruption can have a detrimental effect on public services when, for instance, embezzlement and misappropriation reduce the total volume of resources available for public spending. A recent study found that people living in regions with higher levels of corruption in the education sector had less access to education (Ouedraogo et al. 2024). This is because corruption can reduce the proportion of public funds that have been allocated for a given purpose – for example, procuring and delivering vaccines – from actually benefitting intended recipients as some of the assigned resources are

diverted by corrupt intermediaries who appropriate some of the funds (Delavallade 2006:222).

Clientelism and corruption

There is a vast literature on patron-client relationships; the specific focus here is when these certain expressions of patron-client interactions can be understood as corruption. Patron-client relations refer to an instrumental exchange in which a power figure – a patron – is able to provide some benefits to their personal followers – the clients – who give the patron their loyalty and assistance in return for those benefits (Scott 1972:92). While most literature considers all types of patron-client relations where the currency of the client is political support to be a form of clientelism, for the purpose of this Helpdesk Answer it is useful to distinguish between three commonly discussed forms of patron-client relationships: patronage, clientelism and cronyism.

Transparency International (2009:32) defines patronage as a ‘form of favouritism in which a person is selected, regardless of qualifications or entitlement, for a job or government benefit because of political affiliations or connections’. Cronyism is closely related to patronage but mainly refers to providing material benefits, such as lucrative contracts, to peer supporters, also referred to as cronies.

For its part, clientelism is defined by Transparency International (2009:7) as ‘an unequal system of exchanging resources and favours based on an exploitative relationship between a wealthier and/or more powerful “patron” and a less wealthy and weaker “client”’.

When patronage has been studied from a political science perspective, it has usually been described as a system in which politicians ‘distribute public jobs or special favours in exchange for electoral support’ (Weingrod 1968:379). In other words, it is the discretionary appointment of specific individuals to public office positions (Canen & Wantchekon 2022:111). Patronage understood as such thus requires that the patron is an office holder, since they could not allocate a public job or government benefit otherwise.

Van de Walle (2007: 51) describes a variant of the traditional form of patronage called ‘prebendalism’, whereby the patron provides a public office to an individual so that they can have personal access over state resources. This is common in authoritarian regimes, and it differs from patronage in the purpose of the job appointment. In patronage, the job itself is considered the reward for political support, whereas in prebendalism the chief advantage is allowing the person to abuse their position for personal gain, and it is this opportunity for illicit self-enrichment that constitutes the reward for the client’s political support (van de Walle 2007:52).

Cronyism refers to the reciprocal exchange between a patron and a client, in this case a crony, and includes the patron giving something valued by the client (Khatri et al. 2006:62). For this paper, cronyism thus refers to providing things like lucrative contracts to influential players to shore up political support. Unlike patronage and prebendalism, which imply giving political supporters jobs in the government, cronyism refers to politicians giving benefits to individuals that can provide powerful political support (such as financing a campaign) or can use their connections to increase this support.

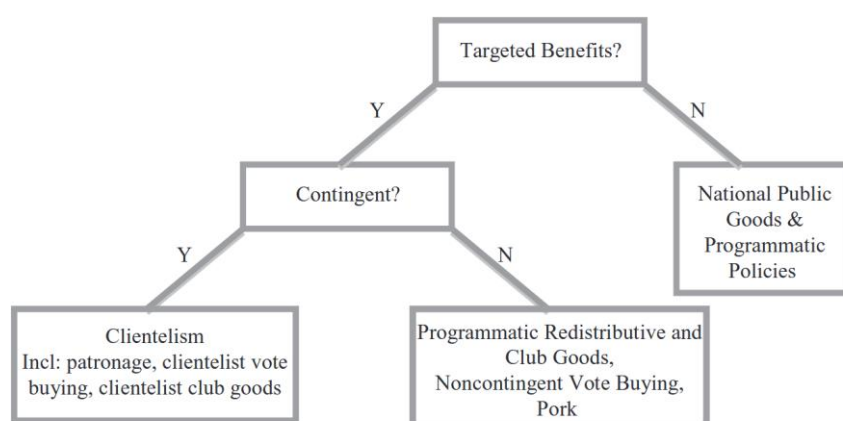
In the academic literature, clientelism has often been framed more broadly in the context of a system of relations between patrons and clients. This is a distinction between patronage and clientelism, as the latter can cover cases in which the patron is not (yet) an office holder but someone looking to get elected (Hicken 2011:295; Stokes 2011:651).

While the terms are related, they are thus distinct concepts: patronage refers to the distribution of salaried positions or similar government benefits (such as awarding a public project), typically to an individual, as a means of rewarding (past) loyalty or (current) connections. Clientelism, on the other hand, can involve the quid pro quo exchange of a broader range of excludable goods and services (often to a specific group of people) in exchange for (future) ongoing political support (Hicken 2011:291; Magaloni et al. 2007:182; Stokes 2011:649).

An important characteristic of clientelism is thus that it is iterative in nature; the provision of a benefit in exchange for political support does not need to be immediate and there is usually a lag between the two (Hicken 2011:291). One-off interactions, like bribes or a gift in an electoral event, thus do not constitute clientelist exchanges because it is the ongoing nature of the clientelist relationship that underpins the reciprocity needed for the exchange to work (Hicken 2011:292-96).

Specifically, for the purposes of this paper, we largely adopt Bardhan's (2022:1) definition of clientelism as 'a discretionary provision of private benefits by government officials and political parties (who have control over public resources) selectively to particular groups of citizens, in exchange for their votes'. However, unlike Bardhan, we do not limit the nature of the exchange solely to votes. Instead, we consider that a wide range of material benefits and forms of political support (showing up for a campaign rally, canvassing and so on) can form part of a clientelist exchange (Berenschot & Aspinall 2020:1). Understood as such, clientelism is also clearly observable in countries other than electoral democracies. It will, however, play a different role in such regimes. In authoritarian settings, clientelism will still be used to maintain/gain political support but not to mobilise voters (van de Walle 2007, 54). To reduce the complexity of this topic, and because budget management may respond to different incentives in the context of an authoritarian regime, this answer will focus only on the effect of clientelism in electoral democracies.

In the context of democracies, the main difference between clientelism vis-à-vis other forms of political exchange or strategies to secure political support is that what determines whether someone receives the targeted benefit is whether they (will) provide political support to the patron (Hicken 2011:294). Clientelist politics is thus different from other political strategies that also provide material incentives for political support. In pork-barrel politics, the distribution criterion is ‘do you live in my district’, while in programmatic redistributive politics, the criterion is belonging to a particular class of beneficiaries, such as unemployed, retired, poor and so on (Stokes 2011:649). The following figure illustrates these differences.



Source: Hicken 2011:296.

While programmatic strategies also aim, and claim, to provide material benefits to citizens (and the purveyors of programmatic politics would ultimately hope to receive future electoral support in return), programmatic benefits have a public good and redistributive quality, delivering goods and services to some groups with resources collected from other groups (Stokes 2011:649). Furthermore, while programmatic parties hope to get an electoral benefit from the resources (whether goods or services) transferred to the population, this transfer is not conditioned upon reciprocal support (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007:22).

Conversely, in the pork-barrel strategies, a politician may identify a certain target population as their constituency and will identify who is a member with demographic identifiers, such as rurality, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity and so on (Hicken 2011:294). Ultimately, however, pork-barrel politicians do not typically discriminate against certain individuals within their core constituency who do not provide political support and, usually, specific people cannot be excluded from receiving the goods or services offered to the group as a whole (Hicken 2011:294; Stokes 2011:649). In a pork-barrel strategy, the politician cannot differentiate those who vote for them from those who do not in a way that would allow for a contingent exchange of benefits for political support or does not have the necessary discretion to provide those benefits in a clientelist manner even if they wished to do so.

The provision of goods and services can be framed as responding and addressing the needs of constituents, and most political strategies involve providing tangible benefits to supporters. However, in clientelist politics – unlike programmatic or pork-barrel politics – the provision of material benefits is portrayed as a favour dependent on continued support, not a right, and thus it can be withdrawn if support is no longer provided. In this sense, clientelism relies on a power imbalance between patron and clients, since the client will need the patron to access goods and services they cannot acquire otherwise.

Due to this characteristic of clientelist systems, the benefit may not take the form of an inducement but can also be the threat of withholding something from the client (Stokes 2011:649). This is what Mares and Young (2019:23) term a ‘policy coercion’ clientelist strategy. A politician may threaten to revoke goods and services from citizens if they do not offer political support, such as making the provision of certain public services contingent on party membership, being present in a particular rally or showing up to vote. This can also affect the incentives for politicians and political parties to turn to clientelism as a strategy. Kılıçdaroğlu (2020), for example, argues that a party is more prone to using clientelism as a strategy to remain in power than a strategy to gain it, since it is only when in power that they have access to the state resources that could facilitate such exchanges.

These types of clientelist exchanges have implications in terms of inequality as the citizens that enter into clientelist relationships may not have other options to access those goods and services. Under certain conditions, particularly in contexts of extreme poverty, clientelist exchanges can provide crucial resources to disadvantaged populations who might otherwise be excluded from state support (Gisselquist et al. 2024:3). As such, when clientelism facilitates access services to groups in situations of poverty or vulnerability that would otherwise not be provided, clientelism can offer a (suboptimal) means of securing these groups’ basic needs (Hicken 2011:302).

In this sense, certain clientelist strategies rely on providing these ‘benefits’ to segments of the population living in poverty in settings in which the state does not provide universal public goods and services (Stokes 2011:650). This can create an incentive for successful clientelist politicians not to pursue universal redistributive policies that could change the dependent relationship of their clients (Hicken 2011:290; Stokes 2011:663). Furthermore, while certain groups may benefit from the ‘benefits’ provided by clientelist politicians, not all people living in poverty will access these goods and services that should be public. Finally, while clientelism describes a relation between a patron and a client, this is a simplification for the purposes of making the concept clear. In reality, clientelism usually implies a more complex system that includes brokers and networks acting on behalf of the patron and the client (Hicken 2011:291).

The question arises whether the type of political clientelism described above meets Transparency International’s definition of [corruption](#) as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Several scholars have noted that clientelism and corruption are closely linked and have similar effects on the quality of governance and rule of law (de la O

2015:181; Lindberg et al. 2022:2), while others have even used these concepts as proxies for one another (Hicken 2011:303).

The author considers that, in most cases, clientelist practices perpetrated by public officials can be viewed as one form of the broader phenomenon of corruption. While the relationship between patrons and clients might not itself qualify as corrupt, it can be *corrupting*. For example, once a patron assumes public office, the ties that bind them to their clients may cause them to abuse the power entrusted in them to allocate state resources in the public interest to instead advance their own interest, such as securing political support through the selective distribution of state resources to their clients and cronies. This can contribute to a vicious circle: when citizens perceive high levels of corruption among public officials, they become more likely to believe that vote selling is widespread in their community and thus more willing to sell their own votes (de la O 2015:181).

Moreover, while certain clientelist practices can be considered corrupt, such as misusing state resources for vote buying, pursuing clientelist strategies can lead politicians to engage in other forms of corruption to secure the funds needed to maintain expensive clientelist machines, including the promise of governmental contracts in exchange for campaign funds (Canen & Wantchekon 2022:110; Singer 2009). In cronyism, patrons are buying the political support of elites, and it can include corrupt practices such as politicians allocating public resources to private contractors as rewards for their contributions to their campaigns (Gherghina & Volintiru 2017:121). In Romania, for example, between 2008 and 2012, private firms provided resources for vote buying in exchange for access to public procurement (Gherghina & Volintiru 2017:133).

Clientelism can thus have detrimental effects on democracy by reversing the accountability relationship between voters and elected officials as citizens become accountable for their actions (how they vote) to parties and politicians (Hicken 2011; Stokes 2011). In Turkey, for example, the clientelist resources the ruling party provided to businesspeople and the urban poor reportedly increased their toleration of the growing authoritarianism tendencies of the governing party (Esen and Gumuscu 2020).

The under-provision of universal public services and goods and its personalised provision at the individual level makes citizens more dependent on clientelism and can inhibit collective demands for change (Fergusson et al. 2022:294). In an electoral democracy, if voters would prefer to vote for someone other than the clientelist incumbent, they risk facing the incumbent's retaliation if the patron is not voted out of public office (Stokes 2011:651). This can potentially lead to voters not voting for candidates they think could lose to the incumbent (van de Walle 2007, 64).

Clientelism and public financial management

Clientelism can have different effects on the management of public finances as different clientelist strategies exist and clientelist politicians might provide different benefits in different situations. Berenschot and Aspinall (2020:14), for example, consider that, in situations where politicians seek to maintain political support over long time horizons, which implies ongoing interactions, they will need control over state resources to engage in clientelist strategies to generate support among voters. Dyzenhaus (2021:3) found a similar dynamic in Kenya, where the ability of the central government to use clientelism depended on its ability to control resources versus local authorities from the opposition. That is, politicians can either use resources because they directly control them at the central government level or because they control local authorities that have their own clientelist networks. While some definitions may be more specific than others (for example, referring to clientelism exclusively as the exchange of goods for votes), the literature referred to here, shares this paper's broad understanding of clientelism as the delivery of goods and/or services in exchange for political support.

When clientelism involves state resources, it violates basic principles of equality in access to what are ultimately public resources (Mares & Young 2019:17). Clientelism can distort public financial management processes in three main ways that matter for public service provision (Bardhan et al. 2024:692):

1. when voters are less responsive to certain benefits, i.e. they do not offer political support in return for these benefits, this could lead to an under-provision of that type of goods and services, even if they are positive for society
2. clientelism can be a source of inequality in resource allocation across regions as the central government will only provide resources more or less equally when the different levels of governments are politically aligned
3. when local politicians are permitted a lot of discretion to enact clientelist provisions of goods and services, they can also divert and misuse the resources more easily beyond using them to secure political support

Clientelism in fiscal policy

While there is still little literature that has explored the links between clientelism and fiscal policy, there are several ways in which clientelism might affect a state's fiscal policy. For example, Afonso et al. (2015) argue that, in Greece, political parties that heavily relied on their ability to control state budgets to reward political clients were less likely to agree to austerity reforms in comparison to Portugal, where politicians relied less on clientelist strategies for their political success. This can be attributed to the fact that clientelist parties rely on the selective distribution of state resources (Afonso et al. 2015). In clientelist systems, clientelist political parties in government will

prefer to preserve economic policies that cater to clientelist demands and avoid policies that could limit discretionary resource allocation (Trantidis 2016:19).

Political parties and politicians need to raise substantial financial resources to run electoral campaigns. This can create an incentive to promise that, once they are in office, they will lower tax rates for certain special interest groups as part of an attempt to attract campaign donations. In clientelist contexts, the political ruling elite will take into consideration how an initiative to raise tax revenue can affect the interests of an elite that provides them with political support (Kjær et al. 2017:9). A study in Uganda found that the efforts from the revenue authority to expand the domestic revenue base sometimes clashed with political interests that preferred to abolish unpopular taxes and grant tax exemptions to funders of the ruling party (Kjær et al. 2017:26). Furthermore, the Ugandan revenue authority was not free from political interference and some believed some senior employees were picked because of their connection to the president (Kjær et al. 2017:20). While there is debate around the overall long-term effects of tax cuts on the economy, tax cuts lead to less state revenue in the immediate future (Weinberg 2024). Clientelism may also encourage political leaders not to enforce existing tax codes in order to curry favour among certain powerful interest groups (Kjær et al. 2017; Trantidis 2016).

Research has also shown that clientelism can have a detrimental effect on local direct taxation as citizens witnessing clientelism will interpret any allocation decision as a product of a clientelist exchange instead of an attempt to provide public goods (Crook 2017). This relates to fiscal contract theory, which contends that when citizens pay tax, they demand a return for it (Kjær et al. 2017:9). If citizens do not believe they will get something in return for paying taxes, it is likely they will be less inclined to pay them. At the individual level, a study in Colombia found that tax evasion and the propensity to engage in clientelist relationships were closely related at the individual level, that is, individuals who were embedded in patron-client relationships were more likely to avoid paying taxes (Fergusson et al. 2022:293).

Prebends can also cause revenue loss, if the jobs for collecting state revenue (for example, customs agents) are given to political supporters so they can use their position for personal enrichment instead of collecting revenue for the public coffers (van de Walle 2007:56). If policies are chosen only to generate income and political support, things like tariffs, public contracts and licences may be seen by politicians as a way to make revenue that can then be appropriated through bribes and kickbacks or given to clients as a reward for their political support (Kurer 1993:261–62) reducing the revenue collected for public services.

Finally, even in the face of external pressures for fiscal and economic reform, clientelist politicians will try to mitigate the costs of reform policies on core supporter groups, designing reforms in a way that preserves their benefits as far as possible (Trantidis 2016:20). In countries characterised by clientelist politics, reforms aiming to make public sector financial management more transparent have been found to be less likely to succeed as parliamentarians, themselves embedded in patron-client relationships,

had fewer incentives to perform checks on the executive branch (Cruz & Keefer 2015:26).

Clientelism in budget allocation across sectors

Clientelism can have an impact on decisions regarding policymaking, including budget formulation and setting the government's policy priorities. Public spending may be allocated to a particular sector because it is more fertile for rent-seeking or because the risk of detection is minimal and resources are easily concealed (Bazie et al. 2024:9). In general, when allocation is based on political support, it can lead to suboptimal spending decisions (Kurer 1993:271), which is detrimental for the public resources.

Depending on the objective of the clientelist exchange (if the goal is to secure votes or to buy elite support), the spending priorities may be different. In Iraq, for example, clientelism entailed elites seeing the allocation of resources as a way to buy people's affiliations (Abdullah, Gray and Clough 2018). In this way, these elites acted as brokers for the ruling class securing political support further down the line through resource allocation.

When patrons use public resources for clientelist purposes, this can affect how the public budget is distributed among sectors. For example, where officials seek to reward their supporters with prebends, they may create and allocate government positions in those areas and allow them to illicitly self-enrich with impunity, instead of focusing on areas that will deliver universal essential services.

The nature of a clientelist exchange – politicians provide a benefit expecting political support in return – creates incentives to move away from the universal provision of goods and services because, in a universal system, excluding those who did not provide the expected political support would be difficult (Lo Bue et al. 2021:3). Clientelist politics therefore encourages budgetary policies with high levels of discretionary public spending that allow officials to channel funds towards certain individuals or small groups, instead of more formalised budgetary policies that can target broad categories of citizens on explicit criteria (Kyriacou 2023:2). This is consistent with the finding that clientelist systems will usually undersupply non-targeted, national public goods and services while overproviding those that target narrow constituencies (Hicken 2011:303).

Since the provision of basic universal services is a form of redistribution, as the taxes extracted from a particular group are then used to provide benefits for the population as a whole or to other specific sectors of the population that do not pay taxes (for example, children attending school), redistributive policies can be affected by clientelism. A study of 87 countries found that clientelism undermined fiscal redistribution across the total population by reducing public good provision (Kyriacou 2023).

Clientelism in budget allocation across categories of spending

Clientelism can involve awarding lucrative public contracts or concessions to political clients who own/operate politically connected firms. For example, in Türkiye, pro-

government businesses were awarded lucrative public contracts, cheap credit and tax relief, while in return these business provided the AKP political party with ‘campaign contributions, government-friendly media, donations to pro-AKP charities and foundations, and the provision of goods to the urban poor’ (Esen and Gumuscu 2020:7). In this manner, the AKP has been able to establish a reliable pool of political donors and shore up sources of electoral support among the population (Gürakar & Bircan 2018).

Perhaps one of the biggest ways in which patron-client dynamics affect the quantity of resources available for public service provision relates to patronage. Patronage can increase the allocation of resources to payroll but not to actual goods, and it does not necessarily improve the provision of services. A study found that a large proportion of government spending in Comoros was destined to salaries due in part to political clientelism, with around 54% of government staff working in the public education sector, making it the largest employment sector in government (Rose & Gowthaman 2015:23). The size of the public sector crowded out other forms of spending, but this was kept in place because state employment was the one thing politicians had to offer in exchange for political support (Rose & Gowthaman 2015:5,19). This has an effect on the available resources for other categories of spending as the creation of new salaried positions in public institutions simply to reward or buy the support of clients and cronies can reduce the volume of funds that institution has to provide goods and services to citizens.

In Iraqi patronage networks, people were hired only for their loyalty to the ruling party and could easily lose their jobs if they did not provide this support (Abdullah et al. 2018:669). This affected resources because the state payroll grew to accommodate patronage demands and included the creation of ‘ghost jobs’ in which people, particularly in the army, received salaries but did not actually work (Abdullah et al. 2018:671).

In terms of public service provision, this presents two major problems. First, as patronage awards jobs to people without the necessary skills for them, it is likely that additional people, with the correct skills will need to be hired. Second, by inflating the public payroll, fewer resources are available to provide the goods and services that citizens actually require.

Patronage also makes reforming the public sector more difficult. An analysis of World Bank public sector reform loans in 109 countries found that the reforms were resisted more in countries with clientelist politicians. These reforms aimed to introduce meritocratic recruitment and would thus reduce patronage by restricting politicians’ discretion over hiring (Cruz & Keefer 2015).

Clientelism in budget allocation across localities and groups

During resource allocation, clientelism can also lead to some localities being given preferential treatment. When the core support of a clientelist politician is geographically concentrated in one region, the politician may allocate the resources to favour that particular region to the detriment of others. In Ghana, for example, political

representatives from the country's northern regions have played a less prominent role in ruling coalitions at the central government level, which according to Abdulai and Hickey (2016) resulted in fewer resources being allocated to education in their regions compared to other parts of the country.

In Türkiye, to ensure the efficiency of the clientelist network, labour was divided between the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, which directed resources toward the disabled and elderly, and municipalities, which were responsible for clientelist exchanges targeting the poor (Arslantas 2019:112). Such an arrangement can have effects on how the budget is distributed across localities, with municipalities that concentrate more clients receiving more resources, and across groups, in this case with more budget likely being allocated to the disabled and elderly than other groups also covered by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. This division had another budgetary consequence in Türkiye, that of 'double funding'. Because clientelist benefits were dispensed through different channels and based on clientelist criteria, a client could simultaneously receive benefits from different channels, and some municipal officers preferred to give benefits even in the case of double funding so as not to disappoint clients (Arslantas 2019:112-13).

A study of West Bengal found that the distribution of local government programme benefits across villages responded to political competition in that it was driven by incumbents trying to remain in office (Bardhan et al. 2024). The incumbents that feared they could lose their election spent more on benefits for their clients. Depending on the type of programmes being prioritised for such spending, this could mean repurposing spending from another programme, such as education, or using future budgets, thus creating a scarcity situation further down the line.

Clientelist parties may target voters based on how important they are for winning the election, such as swing voters, thus diverting resources from those most in need (Kyriacou 2023:2). In Argentina, a study found that political brokers preferred to allocate scarce indivisible social benefits to individuals in larger households as this was more likely to bring more political support from the rest of the household (Ronconi & Zarazaga 2019).

This suggests that where social protection policy is influenced by clientelist considerations, it might lead to certain groups capturing most of the benefits and other groups being excluded. This can have further implications. In a study of Latin America, for instance, the prevalence of clientelism within a party system was associated with lower levels of support for redistributive social policies among the high-income group (Berens & Ruth-Lovell 2023:106). As such, clientelism appears to undermine elite support for progressive social policies that could expand the welfare provision in those countries (Berens & Ruth-Lovell 2023:107).

In politics characterised by clientelism, groups whose patrons are currently in power are likely to receive favourable treatment, such as a disproportionate share of public resources, typically to the detriment of other constituencies. In such environments,

discriminatory policies can emerge as patrons provide access to government services at zero or lower cost to political supporters – their clients – than non-supporters – non-clients (Kurer 1993:270). While most targeted groups will usually come from the lower socioeconomic strata of society, since these groups will not have alternative ways to access the goods and services offered by clientelist patrons (Stokes 2011:650; Stokes et al. 2013:153), the specific targeted groups will still vary in time and space. For example, in Turkey, the clientelist party primarily targeted the urban poor and the devout bourgeoisie (Arslantas 2019:4).

The way that clientelist systems distribute resources often depends on the characteristics of the targeted groups. Similarly, in India, studies have found that political affiliation played a decisive role in the allocation of welfare benefits. In two out of four studied Indian states, members of the local government leader's party were more likely to access poverty alleviation programmes than those who were not members of the ruling party, surpassing other determinants such as language, religion, caste or place of residence (Markussen 2011:1722). Similarly, in West Bengal, a study found that households affiliated with the local ruling party had higher chances of receiving support from a rural employment guarantee programme, while 60 per cent of the households that supported the local party received work, compared to only 30 per cent of non-supporter households (Das 2015:206).

These groups may self-identify (or be identified by others) by any of a wide range of characteristics, such as geographic location, ethnicity, religion, gender or other markers of identity. Clientelist politics thus often relies on and deepens existing societal cleavages, which can have serious implications for the collection, allocation and distribution of public resources across different social groups. This uneven distribution can lead to resource scarcity for certain populations while reinforcing inequalities. In Turkey, for example, Islam played a key role in unifying different social classes under a single political umbrella while discouraging individuals from leaving clientelist arrangements (Arslantas 2019:4).

Finally, clientelist politicians might try to weaken any scheme that seeks to expand the welfare system and provide public services to the whole population (Kyriacou 2023:2). This is partly because schemes that target broad categories of the population, such as services provided in a welfare system, undermine the possibility to target specific groups for their support (Kyriacou 2023:2). This is consistent with panel data analysis of 161 countries from 1900 to 2017 that showed that countries that exhibited more clientelist practices also were somewhat less inclusive in terms of the coverage of their welfare programmes (Lo Bue et al. 2021:2).

Mitigation measures to reduce clientelism in resource allocation

The most direct way to reduce the effects of clientelism on the allocation of public resources would be to reduce the attraction of clientelism as a political strategy. In Britain and the United States, the common 19th century practice of vote buying declined as the electorate's size and average income grew, making clientelist exchanges less attractive to office seekers than programmatic appeals (Stokes et al. 2013:202). As elected politicians shifted from more particularistic interventions (those more suited for clientelist purposes) to more programmatic ones, these programmes ameliorated the underlying problems of the population that previously needed to rely on corrupt political machines to access benefits (Cuéllar and Stephenson 2022:2).

As clientelist strategies can target economically vulnerable populations, reducing vulnerability reduces citizens' need to rely on clientelist relationships with politicians (Bobonis et al. 2022:3). Thus the rollout of universal social welfare policies would undercut the need for clientelist structures by providing citizens with reliable social security that does not depend on political support (Lo Bue et al. 2021:23). However, this is clearly an ambitious structural and long-term change. In the meantime, reducing the influence of political clientelism likely requires combining institutional reforms, transparency measures and strengthening bottom-up accountability.

For clientelism to flourish, politicians and bureaucrats require great discretion over the allocation of resources and programmes with minimal public oversight (Singer 2009:4). Strengthening bureaucratic professionalism is crucial in limiting politicians' ability to use public resources for partisan ends (Cornell & Grimes 2015:206,) while merit-based and transparent recruitment in the public sector can mitigate the influence of patronage (Omar 2024). A well-functioning, independent bureaucracy can curb clientelism by ensuring that state resources are allocated based on public good considerations rather than political support (Gisselquist et al. 2024:2). Particularly, insulating bureaucrats and regulators from political influence further limits discretionary appointments and reduces opportunities for clientelist exchanges (Canen & Wantchekon 2022:115). Strong independent supreme audit institutions (SAIs), which include the auditor general, national audit offices and courts of accounts or audit, can audit government revenue and expenditure (Duri 2022:20). While SAIs' powers may vary, in general they include: undertaking annual audits of public expenditure; highlighting any discrepancies in the audits' findings; seeking to identify fraud or corruption; and assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending (Global Partners Governance 2014:3).

In general, making budget allocation processes less discretionary may not make clientelism as a political strategy less attractive but it can render clientelist strategies difficult to implement. Parliaments can be involved in all stages of the budget cycle, making them a key source of oversight (Duri 2022:17; Global Partners Governance 2014:3). This oversight role gives the legislature the opportunity to act on public concerns (Global Partners Governance 2014:3). At the budget formulation stage, the IMF fiscal transparency code recommends that the legislature and the public are given enough time to examine and approve the government's annual budget (2019:11).

Once the budget is approved, the [OECD](#) suggests parliaments, independent fiscal institutions and the public are engaged in its oversight. One key way in which parliaments can scrutinise public expenditure is through parliamentary committees (Global Partners Governance 2014:3). Committees give representatives the opportunity to work together and look in depth at the government's spending (Global Partners Governance 2014:3). Parliamentary committees with a specific financial focus can also closely work with the SAI and use their audit reports for their own inquiries (Global Partners Governance 2014:3).

Measures to accomplish less discretion in budget allocation can also come from the community and the civil society, through promoting transparency, building check systems and engaging the community in the budgeting processes. The [International Budget Partnership](#) collaborates with citizens and grassroots movements to make budget systems more open and accountable. Their initiatives to improve public budget accountability include: [strengthening underserved communities](#) to gain influence over budgets; [supporting civil society groups](#) to engage in budget process and promote accountability; [monitoring government spending](#) to see if it deviates from the approved budget and why; and [improving audit accountability](#).

Participatory budgeting has long been advocated as a way of giving the community a say in how public money is spent. While the benefits will depend on the scale and nature of the participation (Williams et al. 2017), participatory budget initiatives allow communities to allocate resources and monitor public spending.

Social audits, an accountability mechanism by which citizens organise and mobilise to audit the government, can be an approach to achieve the transparent and accountable management of public resources (Berthin 2011:20). One type of social audit that could potentially mitigate clientelist practices is a public expenditure tracking survey (PET). These types of surveys involve citizens tracking public expenditure to identify the percentage of the resources that are actually reaching their targets (Berthin 2011:50). A 1996 PET in Uganda successfully identified that local government officials had discretionary power over budget transfers in the education sector and disproportionately allocated them to larger schools who had more opportunities to voice their claims for the funds (Dehn et al. 2002:22). Because social audits can help measure the consistency between promises and actual results (Berthin 2011:32), they can also help shift to more programmatic demands from the population.

Increasing general government transparency and public access to information can also curb clientelist practices. Media campaigns and raising awareness about the population's entitlements is important to curb clientelist practices, reducing the perception that access to certain goods and services is contingent upon political support (Das 2015:203; Lo Bue et al. 2021:23). Town hall meetings or debates can also make information available to citizens (Canen & Wantchekon 2022:114). In a field experiment in Benin, town hall meetings based on programmatic political campaigns showed success in reducing the prevalence of clientelism and had no impact on turnout, demonstrating that political campaigns that called for expanding access to public goods for those people most in need were no less effective than clientelist strategies at getting out the vote (Fujiwara and Wantchekon 2013:242).

Canen and Wantchekon (2022:114) suggest putting in place policies that reveal information to voters about difficult-to-observe behaviours, like audits of political jurisdictions and using technology to increase government transparency. In Brazil, randomised audits of local governments significantly reduced both politicians' provision of campaign handouts and voters' willingness to exchange votes for benefits (Bobonis et al. 2024).

Finally, strengthening electoral management bodies and their independence can increase the costs of clientelism, making it a less attractive strategy for politicians. By improving electoral oversight, enforcing campaign finance regulations and preventing vote buying, these institutions can contribute to a decline in clientelist practices (Lundstedt and Edgell 2020).

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