

Political Clientelism and Government Accountability in West Bengal

Theory and Evidence



In brief

- The political economy literature on government accountability in developing countries has mainly overlooked clientelism as a form of political distortion; preferring rather to focus on inequalities between classes.
- Clientelism embodies strategic transfers made by political parties and governments to poor and disadvantaged groups to secure votes, and thus, consolidate political power. Although these policies may be seen as pro-poor, they often compromise long-term development and create biases to private transfer programs with short term payoffs.
- More attention needs to be paid to clientelism as a source of lack of government accountability and such concerns should be incorporated into evaluations of government policies and institutions.
- Evaluating targeting performance of governments delivering public services needs to incorporate clientelistic distortions.
- The impact of political reservations for minorities or women needs to incorporate attendant effects on clientelism as well as targeting success. There may be a conflict between these two objectives, as in West Bengal.
- Implementation points:
 - Services need to be assessed for composition between short-term private benefits, long-term private benefits and public benefits.
 - Horizontal inequities within target populations need to be assessed.
 - Methods of choosing beneficiaries need to be assessed.

Policy Motivation

The political economy literature on government accountability in developing countries has mainly focused on distortions in the political mechanism that can impede the choice of pro-development and pro-poor policies by elected governments. These include inequalities between different socio-economic classes with regard to political rights, awareness, political participation, ability to lobby and contribute to election campaigns. These inequalities translate into higher priority assigned to wealthier and more powerful classes by policy makers, a phenomenon commonly referred to as *elite capture*. This concept has dominated the discussion on the pros and cons of decentralization of public service delivery to local governments, or effect of political reservations for minorities and women.

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This approach overlooks a different form of political distortion – *clientelism* – also important in developing country democracies, fundamentally different from elite capture. Clientelism refers to strategic transfers made by political parties and governments to poor and disadvantaged groups as a means of securing their votes, in an effort to consolidate political power. By their very nature such transfers provide an appearance of successful pro-poor targeting of public services. But they often come at the expense of long-term development, since they create biases towards private transfer programs with short-term payoffs at the expense of public goods or private benefits of a long-run nature such as education or health services. They are inherently discretionary rather than programmatic, with the intention of benefitting narrow subsets of intended beneficiary groups, resulting in horizontal and vertical inequity.

Policy Impact

Greater attention needs to be paid to clientelism as a possible source of lack of government accountability. The evaluation of government policies and institutions needs to incorporate clientelistic distortions as well as elite capture and corruption. This requires attention to the composition of benefit programs delivered (e.g., between private and public goods, between short-term and long-term benefits) as well as finer information concerning the targeting of such programs.

Audience

Anyone involved in designing or evaluating government institutions for delivery of public programs – policy-makers, consultants, think-tanks, academic researchers.

Policy Implications

- Evaluating targeting performance of governments delivering public services needs to incorporate clientelistic distortions. It is not enough to measure the proportion of any given service program delivered to socio-economically deprived sections of the population.

- The impact of political reservations for minorities or for women needs to incorporate attendant effects on clientelism as well as targeting success: there may be a conflict between these two sets of objectives, as was the case in West Bengal. Affirmative action programs on the basis of ethnicity or caste may result in increased clientelistic practices with adverse implications for both long-term growth and general improvement of living standards within the target group.

Implementation

“Evaluating targeting performance of governments delivering public services needs to incorporate clientelistic distortions”

- The entire range of services delivered to any given population needs to be assessed, for composition between short-term private benefits, long-term private benefits and public benefits.
- Horizontal inequities within target populations need to be assessed.
- Methods of choosing beneficiaries need to be assessed: whether on the basis of discretion of local officials implementing the program, or on the basis of programmatic criteria laid out in advance and implemented with minimal scope for discretion.

Further Readings

Kitschelt H. and S. Wilkinson (2007), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York.

Lizzeri A. and N. Persico (2004), “Why Did the Elites Extend the Suffrage? Democracy and the Scope of Government, With an Application to Britain’s “Age of Reform”,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 119(2), 705-763, May.

About the authors

Pranab Bardhan, a Cambridge University PhD, has been at Berkeley since 1977, following teaching appointments at MIT and the Delhi School of Economics. He was the chief editor of the *Journal of Development Economics* for 1985-2003. He was the co-chair of the MacArthur Foundation-funded Network on the Effects of Inequality on Economic Performance for 1996-2007. He held the Distinguished Fulbright Siena Chair at the University of Siena, Italy in 2008-9. He has done theoretical and field studies research on rural institutions in poor countries, on political economy of development policies, and on international trade. His current research involves theoretical and empirical work on decentralized governance, and the political economy of development in China and India.

Dilip Mookherjee is Professor of Economics at Boston University and the Director of the Institute of Economic Development at Boston University. He graduated from the Delhi School of Economics and the LSE where he received his PhD in 1982. He is Fellow of the Econometric Society, recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Mahalanobis Memorial Award of the Indian Econometric Society. He is currently President of BREAD (Bureau for Research in Economic Analysis of Development). His current research interests include development, inequality and public policy in various contexts such as land reform, local governance, deforestation, finance, microcredit, agricultural marketing, middlemen and trade.

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International Growth Centre,
London School of Economic
and Political Science,
Houghton Street,
London WC2A 2AE



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