

IGC Policy Brief 2010-12-002

Title: *Political Clientelism and Government Accountability in West Bengal: Theory and Evidence*

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Policy Motivation for Research: 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.

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:

- 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.