

Research Statement

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My research is motivated by a central question: how do governments determine where to allocate resources? I am driven by a desire to understand the causes and consequences of an unequal distribution of national resources in developing democracies. I am especially interested in how relationships between national and subnational politicians help determine which geographic areas receive greater access to central government funds. My secondary interest includes questions of how new institutions in developing democracies affect elite behavior and citizen representation. In my research, I am committed to using a mixed-method approach, including formal theory, regression analysis, and survey experiments, in order to overcome barriers to measurement. My use of mixed-methods also helps me to test my theories from a variety of perspectives.

Clientelism and Club Goods

How politicians choose to attract voters has implications for both who is elected into office and which citizens politicians will represent. In my dissertation, I look at questions of resource allocation with a particular focus on how club goods, or excludable public goods, are used as clientelist benefits. Throughout my research, I define clientelism as the targeted exchange of goods or benefits for political support and I define club goods as excludable public goods. Thus, I explore two central puzzles: 1) Where are politicians most likely to use club goods as clientelist goods and 2) What factors help determine when brokers are reliable?

In the first article of my dissertation, I explore the relationship between national and local politicians in distributing club goods benefits. I ask under what conditions local politicians will act as reliable brokers for national legislators. Reliable brokers are intermediaries who can translate the resources from politicians into votes from voters. However, when brokers are also elected politicians, they have independent incentives to claim credit for club goods benefits in order to improve their own standing with voters. To answer this question, I develop a formal signaling model of the interactions between legislators and local politicians. In this model, subnational politicians can send a signal to national politicians of whether they are “ambitious” or “not-ambitious” by investing maintaining and strengthening their voter networks. After observing the signal, the national legislator can choose to provide a club good. The local-level politician then decides either to claim credit for the good or to attribute credit to the national politician. The model predicts that ambitious mayors are more likely than non-ambitious mayors to attribute credit for larger projects to legislators. This occurs because ambitious mayors derive a larger utility from cooperating with the central government than non-ambitious mayors. I argue that the added benefit for cooperation makes ambitious mayors more likely to behave as reliable brokers. Moreover, the model predicts conditions where the legislator will be able to distinguish between ambitious and not-ambitious mayors and when not-ambitious mayors will mimic ambitious mayors. I test this model using interview data from local and national level politicians in Colombia.

In the second article of my dissertation, I address the question of how to measure a local politician's investment in building and maintaining their voter network. I use a Bayesian Mixed-Membership model in order to create a new, original model of local-level patronage based on patterns in public hiring practices. In Bayesian analysis, the parameter estimates are a combination of the data used to fit a model and prior information. In order to estimate patronage, I fit the model using information about public employees conditioned on the demographic characteristics of a municipality. This technique allows me to estimate to what extent hiring decisions are political, as opposed to meritocratic, in nature. I validate my estimate of patronage using qualitative data and survey data on the clientelism and corruption from the Latin American Public Opinion Project.

Finally, in the third article of my dissertation I ask which municipalities are more likely to receive club goods from national legislators. I argue that municipalities with clientelist mayors are more likely to receive club goods from the central government. This occurs because a clientelist mayor has a stable, disciplined voter block that can be incentivized to support the national politician. As a result, clientelist mayors are better equipped to translate club goods into votes, making the mayors desirable brokers for national politicians. I test this theory in the case of Colombia and I apply my new measure of local-level patronage, a specific type of clientelism that depends on repeated interactions, as a proxy for clientelism. I find that more clientelist municipalities are more likely to receive discretionary transfers from the central government, independent of municipal characteristics or the party affiliation of mayors. This tells us that local-level clientelism can increase access to additional central government resources and suggests that local-level clientelism may also be a strategy that helps increase access to central-government resources.

Outcomes of and Responses to Clientelism

As I continue to explore questions of resource allocation, I plan to expand my dissertation project to analyze how citizens respond to varieties of resource allocation and clientelist strategies. First, I ask if voters are able to identify which politicians provide club goods and how the allocation of club goods affects vote choice. I argue that when mayors attribute credit to national-level politicians, voters are more likely to reward the politician who provides club goods. I test this theory using a citizen survey of over 2,000 citizens throughout Colombia. I use a vignette experiment that varies which politicians attend an inauguration for a new public project and asks citizens who is most responsible for the project. Then, I randomly ask how the project will affect the vote share of the legislator or mayor. I find that when a national politician receives credit from a mayor, voters are more than twice as likely to identify legislators as responsible for funding the project and are more likely to vote for that legislator. Notably, I find that there is no punishment of politicians who are attributing credit, perhaps suggesting that credit-claiming is less beneficial than expected.

I plan on exploring how citizens respond to clientelism in two additional projects. First, I will explore how variance in different types of clientelist benefits—fiscal benefits, material goods, jobs, or club goods—elicit different behavioral and social-desirability responses. Second, I will analyze how the dynamics of local-level clientelism affect how citizens respond to clientelist candidates. In particular, I want to study how the presence of clientelism at the local level affects how citizens evaluate clientelist candidates and their likelihood of responding

positively to clientelist appeals.

Another way I plan on evaluating the effects of resource allocation on citizens is through a study of how voters update their perception of who is responsible for public works when politicians at different levels of government both claim credit for local projects. In this project, I will look at how the timing and strength of different signals change citizen's understanding of who is responsible for providing public resources. This project will allow me to further explore the puzzling finding that local politicians do not seem to be punished by voters for attributing credit to national politicians.

Finally, I'm interested in the effects of unequal resource allocation on both citizen's access to resources and government accountability. Specifically, I'm interested in analyzing how access to club goods and the presence of local-clientelism perpetuate territorial inequality across municipalities. I ask whether clientelist municipalities are less likely to use national resources to invest in local-level improvements.

Clientelism During Elections

In addition to my interest in how resources are allocated using clientelism generally, I plan to explore how clientelist strategies change in the months leading up to different electoral cycles. As part of my research agenda in the next few years, I will analyze how resource allocation changes during national elections, local elections, and referendum elections to further explore how political dynamics influence which municipalities have additional access to central government transfers.

Similarly, in a coauthored paper with Cecilia Martinez-Gallardo, we explore how coalition politics affect which geographical areas receive additional discretionary transfers from the central government. We ask whether politicians in political parties that are in the same coalition as the majority party will receive additional access to central government resources. We argue that the benefit of being a coalition member is not limited to party members who are part of the governing coalition. Instead, we argue that participation in the president's electoral coalition might be enough for parties to access government resources, even when these parties are not represented in the cabinet. This work will link the literatures on clientelism and coalition politics, and contribute to research on the exchanges that underpin the politics of electoral coalitions.

Politician Adaptation to Democratic Rules

In a secondary avenue of research, I explore how developing democracies adapt to new democratic rules. In a paper with Stephanie McNulty, I explore whether nationally mandated participatory reforms, such as participatory budgeting, help deepen democracy. In the first cross-national quantitative analysis of nationally mandated reform processes, we explore whether a combination of decentralization and participatory reforms improve governance. We find that with time, participatory reforms that are implemented at the local level improve participation and accountability but do not help to curb clientelism. This project has been presented at the Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association and is currently under review.