

How is Brazil at the turn of the 21st century like Great Britain in the 19th? The Roman Republic¹ like the U.S. at the turn of the 20th? In all these places, clientelism—the exchange of money, goods, or in-kind benefits for votes between politicians and individual voters²—was an important way of winning votes. Just like Americans and Britons, however, Brazilians do not vote the way they used to.

Why do people who once voted clientelistically stop doing so? The—very great—temporal and cross-sectional variation in the prevalence of clientelist voting remains largely unexplained. The decline of clientelist voting is one of the more puzzling and persistent phenomena in the fields of democratization, political modernization, and political development, and it is my research question.

I am building a framework for analyzing and explaining the importance of clientelism as a determinant of vote choice. My primary unit of analysis is the individual voter and I use a multi-method approach with qualitative,³ cross-national survey,⁴ and experimental data.

¹ In addition to the Roman Republic, there is also evidence that forms of patronage and clientelism were used in Ancient Athens. See, for instance, Yakobson 1999; Finley 1983; Gallant 1991.

² I define clientelism as the exchange of individual benefits for votes, and clientelist voting as a voter determining her vote based on this type of exchange. Individual benefits are benefits such as money, goods, favors, or in-kind benefits that are given directly to an individual voter in exchange for political support. An essential characteristic of this relationship is its characteristic of being individual—voters enter into individual compacts with patrons and are expected to uphold their end of the bargain by voting for their patron or run the risk of punishment. This definition implies that clientelism is a voluntary but asymmetric relationship because it is an exchange, not a relationship imposed by fiat, but the patron inherently has more power by virtue of her superior socioeconomic position. By defining clientelism as individual, voluntary, and asymmetric, I am in line with the majority of extant scholarship over the past four decades (see, for instance, Graziano 1976, 168; Hilgers 2008, 125; Kaufman 1974; Kitschelt 2000, 849; Lemarchand and Legg 1972, 151; Stokes 2007).

³ I will use two types of qualitative data to help build my theory. First, I will conduct a thorough review of historical examples of clientelism in order to determine how clientelism declined in them over time (if it indeed did decline). In essence, this is an example of Mill's Method of Agreement, in which many disparate examples of the same phenomenon in different settings will be compared in order to determine the common element in all cases. Second, I will add to the fieldwork I have already done in Brazil by conducting ethnographic fieldwork there over the coming year. Over the past year, I have been in Brazil, taking advantage of last year's election to interview a variety of political insiders, campaign workers, and politicians, and to engage in extensive participant observation. I embedded myself within the campaigns of several candidates, accompanying them on typical days of campaigning, in order to gain an insight into how campaigns try to engage with voters.

My experimental data will come from a within-video-game experiment. I will create a simple, text-based single-player video game focused on the topic of immigration. The player will control a recent immigrant to the United States (for which the game will be in English) or Brazil (for which the game will be in Portuguese) in the early 20th century. The objective of the game will be for the player to arrange for her family to come to the country in question. To meet this goal, the player will have to navigate certain problems that many immigrants commonly face in order to gather a stockpile of in-game currency that would allow her to finance her family's transit.

I will measure the effect of income and the number of candidates on clientelist voting by embedding virtual elections featuring clientelist and non-clientelist candidates within this game. Subjects will have to vote in in-game elections, choosing between a candidate who offers them money for their vote and candidates who do not. A first election will be introduced early on in the game, with random assignment determining whether the subject has to choose between a high (>8), medium (4-5) or low (2) number of candidates. After this first, subjects will then be subject to the experimental manipulation. In ½ of the games, subjects will receive a randomly assigned treatment: an increase in money (explained as the subject having made contact with a relative already in the country in question who supplies her with money in order to help). The results between the votes for the clientelist candidate will be downloaded and analyzed to determine if there were any significant differences between the income treatment group and the control group, as well as between elections with different numbers of candidates. I will also conduct analyses to determine whether there is an interactive effect between the income treatment and the number of candidates in the election.

⁴ My cross-national survey data include data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, the Democratic Accountability and Linkages project, and the World Values Survey.

The purpose behind this experiment will be to experimentally manipulate the subject's income in a plausible and ethical way. Actually affecting a subject's income security is impractical and unethical. Simply asking one to fill out a survey and imagine that she has a certain amount of money or income security will not be a strong enough treatment to affect behavior. Game environments, however, are much more absorbing than simple lab or survey experiments, which should lead to more realistic decision-making scenarios.