

Lebanese elections: Clientelism as a strategy to garner votes

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After a prolonged period of horse trading, Lebanon's new electoral law has been adopted and the country is headed for national elections in just under one year. Lebanon's adoption of a proportional representation (PR) system is seen by many as a step in the direction of fostering a more representative system to select some of the most important decision makers in the country. Members of parliament (MP) are constitutionally endowed with the authority to collectively elect a president, issue a vote of confidence to new governments, set national policies including the budget, and hold the government accountable using its oversight function, among other duties. Yet, the new electoral law is being undermined by some of its most central tenets, which preserve clientelistic networks through, among other factors, requiring that a preferential vote be cast and the redrawing of districts in concert with the parliament's confessional quota. Taking all this into consideration, it behooves us to consider those power structures and tactics that underlie our elections.

It should also be recognized that as much as the electoral law is crucial to determining the outcome of an election, electoral behavior will have an equal say on the outcome, if not more. More to the point, how parties and candidates manage their campaigns, mobilize and persuade voters, manipulate the media, shape opinions, and buy votes are either ignored or circumvented. Furthermore, many of these tricks are unknown by the wider public. While this article will not highlight all the methods that parties and politicians employ to win elections, it does look into the clientelistic relationship that links parties and candidates to voters whereby parties or politicians provide services or jobs to voters in return for their political loyalty.

While some people vote based on their sectarian beliefs or ideological convictions, many others support one party or candidate over another based on the services provided to constituents or the cash handed out on election day.

In fact, this provision of services and even outright vote buying goes hand in hand with the majoritarian electoral system that was in place. That is, once parties agree on how to gerrymander electoral districts to their own liking under a majoritarian system, they only need to mobilize a certain number of voters from within these districts to be elected. PR should in theory make gerrymandering harder, particularly with large districts in which every vote counts. Such a system would make vote buying and the provision of services much more expensive, meaning political parties would be forced to develop new strategies to mobilize voters. However, the new Lebanese electoral law has managed to sustain some key facets of clientelism, namely the preferential vote, removing electoral spending limits, inflating the number of registered election delegates, and permitting charitable organizations to offer quid pro quo services during elections.

With the support of Konrad Adenauer Foundation, LCPS conducted focus groups with voters in regions across the country, taking into account gender, age group, sect, income level, and the competitiveness of the district. Some of the key findings are synthesized here. For one, while most participants would like to vote for parties and candidates with national political visions, most opt for existing sectarian parties out of fear of other groups. Hence, many participants made their electoral decision out of the perceived need to protect their own community based on the myth of being threatened as a confessional group—in terms of both physical and resource-based security—by other groups. Two, citizens expect their MPs to provide them with targeted services, jobs, and other favors, especially since state institutions have failed

in designing and implementing policies that make public goods available for everyone, such as jobs opportunities, free and quality education, and universal health coverage. MPs, on the other hand, prefer to provide targeted goods to individuals and families rather than design policies that serve those communities and regions which are most in need.

According to focus group participants, politicians give high-value goods as rewards for active, long-term support from dedicated partisans, especially those who have leverage over large groups of voters. In some instances, politicians provide services to voters with influence, even if they are not party loyalists. High-value goods mainly include jobs and scholarships, as well as payments for medical care, to a lesser extent. Political parties also threaten to deny or withdraw these services from voters who fail or cease to support the candidate or party in question, especially in areas where residents are highly dependent on one powerful party to provide employment and educational or health services. By comparison, low-value goods such as food and petty cash are distributed to weakly-affiliated and persuadable voters with limited resources and significant material needs. These goods are sometimes provided on a regular basis, particularly if the party has a strong distribution system, but appear more frequently and in greater quantity in the months leading up to elections, as a form of vote buying. Parties enlist community leaders such as mayors and mukhtars as brokers (who happen to be tribal elders in most of the cases, especially in rural and periphery areas) to identify and approach persuadable voters in their communities for the purposes of vote buying. It is important to note that in most

cases, services are not supplied voluntarily by parties, but are demanded by citizens themselves. Parties also target large families as they have more votes to deliver than smaller ones.

The former electoral law 25/2008 made these abuses 'legitimate' as it stipulates under article 59 that 'financial donations including service provision or payment of money to voters such as in-kind and cash donations and support to individuals, charity, social, cultural, family, religious organizations or other, or sports clubs and all non-public institutions shall be prohibited during the campaign period, except for those granted by candidates or institutions owned or run by candidates who have been doing so on a regular basis for not less than three years prior to the commencement of the electoral campaign.' This counter-intuitive law not only legitimizes clientelism, but also provides an advantage to long-term clientelistic-based parties and candidates over newcomers to the system.

While some contend that clientelism does provide services to citizens when the state

falls short in doing so, it is argued that the state—managed by the governing elite—fails to do so, giving political parties the opportunity to manipulate the election in their favor by effectively holding voters hostage. In this way, clientelism undermines both democracy and development. For one, the notion that citizens are able to elect their representative or hold them accountable has been undermined as a result of this clientelistic network, where now it is parties that reward or punish voters for their vote choice. This behavior has impacted development as the political elite have no incentives to provide or ensure development for the country since they managed to be elected by buying votes and providing some services to specific groups of people in their districts under a majoritarian system. Clientelism cannot actually improve voters' socio-economic condition beyond doling out some cash or favors to voters, which provides only a temporary boost in income. In fact, we argue and it should be recognized that the opposite is true, namely that these campaign strategies impoverish people by denying them services that they ought to have as a right.

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