



Why do Papua New Guinean voters opt for clientelism? Democracy and governance in a fragile state

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The paper examines the factors supporting the clientelist approach to politics that is having such detrimental impacts on the political and economic performance of Papua New Guinea. Lack of awareness on the part of voters of the consequences of their actions and of the possibility of political alternatives seems the most likely reason for the development and persistence of patron-client politics. Other reinforcing factors include the continuing institutional decay, such as in law and order, that has fed perceptions that superior political alternatives are not available. Data to test these hypotheses are urgently needed to assist efforts to implement change in voter behaviour that only serves to impoverish them.

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It is widely believed that Papua New Guinea's governance problems are a consequence of the political instability that springs, at least partly, from the electoral process. This article takes the argument one step further and asks how this process can best be analysed and what accounts for its development and persistence? The first part of the paper argues that voter behaviour and much of the electoral process can be captured by a simple clientelist model. When it comes to account for why voters engage in clientelist politics the explanations become increasingly

sketchy. Although there are number of answers to the question of why voters continue to elect politicians who have systematically impoverished them—ranging from structural incentives, information problems, prisoners' dilemmas, and political culture—these remain largely untested. The second part of the paper can thus be read as an outline of a research agenda that would seek to explain why voters opt for clientelism and particularistic benefits. An understanding of this issue is vital for the evaluation of political change because it is



trivially true that unless people perceive that their voting behaviour is partly responsible for the predicament they are in and they believe that abandoning clientelism will improve their welfare, the current governance problems are likely to continue.

Clientelism in Papua New Guinea

Many observers regard political instability as the main problem of PNG politics. The political instability is either caused by, or an expression of, a number of characteristics. Parliamentary politics is shaped by the large number of parties represented in parliament¹ and the presence of a great many independent members of parliament (MPs) who attach themselves to whatever government offers them the largest material incentives. There is little party discipline, MPs swap parties frequently, and different factions of a party are to be found in government and on the opposition benches at the same time (Gelu 2005:91). Parties are personalised vehicles for gaining and sharing power, with minimal policy differences. They remain essentially factions within the national parliament, centred upon a leader (Standish 1999:5). Tenures of most MPs are short; around half lost their seats in the elections prior to 2002, when the turnover rate rose to an unprecedented 70.6 per cent.

The most visible and dramatic expressions of political instability are the votes of no-confidence that have brought down in mid-term, directly or indirectly, every Prime Minister elected after independence with the exception of the current Somare government.² As a result, heads of government are most of the time busily defending themselves against threats from votes of no-confidence through building support by allocating and re-allocating lucrative government positions (Dorney 1998:22).

To this parliamentary process corresponds an equally unstable electoral process. From independence in 1975 until 2002, elections were held under a first-past-the-post system.³ The number of parties and candidates that contested the elections has been large and has steadily increased (Fraenkel 2004:123). The elections have been dominated by block-voting, where competing clans and villages tend to put forward their own candidates and voters generally support their local contestant (Burton 1989:261; Saffu 1989:15).⁴ The participation of many candidates with the support of their clan ensures that votes are distributed widely and that winners are elected with a small share of votes (Fraenkel 2004:123). To the weak party allegiance of MPs corresponds the indifference to parties and party politics on the part of the voters. The fragmentation of the electoral system prevents well-founded predictions as to which parties will be in government, even after an election is held, because governments can only be formed by building coalitions involving many partners and complex negotiations—with party leaders corralling their factions in isolated locations in the hope of preventing defections and rounding up potential allies.

It is widely agreed that this instability has been 'a key factor undermining policy stability, continuity and planning in Papua New Guinea' (Reilly 2002a:708) and, more generally, was 'one reason for Papua New Guinea's economic decline' (Reilly 2002a:705).

What kind of political behaviour generates such an outcome? It will be argued that the behavioural assumptions of political clientelism, where voters and politicians are engaging in particularistic rent-seeking, describe the behaviour of PNG voters and politicians well and explain at least some of the characteristics of PNG politics. At its most simple, a clientelist political system



consists of two types of actors, patrons (political leaders) and clients (followers). The political leaders provide their clients with material benefits and in return receive political support. Both leaders and followers are exclusively motivated by material gain; the leader-follower ties will dissolve if the leader fails to deliver. The power of the leaders derives from their access to the resources of the state, to be used for their own benefit and to maintain political power by channelling an amount to their followers that is necessary to maintain their support. Thus both patron and clients are pure material benefit maximisers. Patrons or leaders may be followers of a higher level patron and become brokers: for example, acting as a local 'agent' for a national politician and delivering the local vote at election time.

Clientelism is associated with a particular type of rent-seeking. Conventional collectivist rent-seeking, of the Olsonian type, promotes the collective interests of the members of a group through regular formal administrative and political channels, such as when trade unions and employer organisations influence legislation in their favour. Particularistic rent-seeking, on the other hand, attempts to attract individual or small group benefits by overriding due process in the pursuit of these aims. Thus voters favouring particularistic benefits will have to support politicians whose actions violate public office norms and rules. This pressure on the part of the voters has been said to be one of the distinguishing features of PNG politics.

The Melanesian mindset, as we can call it, often assumes that clan or provincial allegiance has primacy for all politicians and public servants. This is what is behind the constant allegations of nepotism or ethnic favouritism known as wantokism in PNG (Standish 2002b:3).

The pursuit of particularistic benefits does not preclude voters from valuing generalised benefits derived from regular government services: health, education, personal security, infrastructure services or, indeed, welfare payments—which are generalised benefits since they are accessible to all members of society with specified characteristics. All PNG surveys show that people have a strong desire for 'development', a term that encompasses the provision of government services in health, education, infrastructure (roads, transport and electricity) and agricultural extension (see, for example, Brown 1989:249; Sillitoe 1983:201).

The distinguishing feature of clientelism is the desire for particularistic gains that in the PNG context include benefits for clans, such as government contracts, as well as for individuals, such as money for feasts, bride prices, tickets for people to travel, jobs in the public service, or credit for personal use or business ventures (see, for example, Gibbs 2004:9; Dorney 1998:23). The conflict with 'governance' that arises from providing these particularistic benefits is self-evident; by definition they have to be made available outside regular channels.

The importance of particularistic benefits to electoral decisions, combined with the lack of interest voters have shown in general policy issues (Saffu 1989, among others), strongly suggests that voting behaviour is reasonably accurately depicted by the benefit maximisation of the clientelist model. It seems apt to call this behaviour predatory rent-seeking because it disregards and undermines political and administrative institutions and in doing so reduces the welfare of all participants.

Again, there is little controversy about the realism of the assumption that the welfare function of politicians includes primarily political power and personal



wealth: politicians expect their position to yield personal benefits beyond the formal official remuneration of office (Sillitoe 1983:202). Actual behaviour supports this contention: politicians have been taking advantage of their privileged position by obtaining government credit and contracts and operating as facilitators for foreign companies since independence (Hegarty 1979:199).

What are the characteristics of a candidate that are most important to a voter? The clientelist model predicts that voters will tend to support candidates who are likely to be elected, to be in a powerful position in government and thus able to channel resources their way, and who, if elected, actually do so. Candidates will attempt to convince the voters that they fit the bill; that they can rely on strong support and therefore have a reasonable chance of winning; that they are likely to be in a good position to attract government resources when elected; and that they will perform their part of the bargain.

Voters do select candidates conforming to these criteria. Track records play an obvious role: politicians who lose their seats are often ministers who have become out of touch with their electorates. In the case of those untested by government office, voters tend to select personalities likely to succeed in the competitive environment of PNG politics: 'personal qualities' (Gibbs 2004:8–9) or 'leadership qualities' (Saffu 1989:30) play an outstanding role in voting decisions. Education matters too, while those disabled or ill tend to do poorly. Whereas leadership qualities and education are characteristics that improve the chances of being elected and gaining a powerful position in government, the preference for local candidates—'block voting'—addresses the problem of choosing a candidate who fulfils the implicit contract and delivers when in a position to do so. Elected MPs will be tempted to behave opportunistically, for example when their re-

election is less than secure.⁵ In accordance with these assumptions, PNG voters opt for candidates who are socially close—usually they are part of the same clan or village (Gibbs 2004:8)—for whom defection is more difficult because they can be threatened with social sanctions when they fail to live up to expectations.

Clientelist models predict that corruption and self-enrichment is not something that disqualifies politicians in the eyes of the voters; relevant for their decision is solely the amount of benefits delivered. The continued support for politicians who have been implicated in corruption scandals and have enriched themselves⁶ in the process gives credence to the clientelist postulates.⁷

The introduction of transaction costs into the clientelist model helps to answer the puzzle of why many groups put forward nominees—one of which is elected with a small proportion of the total vote—rather than cooperating and increasing their chances of representation by promoting common candidates. Although, in principle, cooperation allows mutual gains, it may not occur where deferred exchanges invite opportunism and contractual arrangements are inherently incomplete in their formulation; and an enforcement mechanism is unavailable or too costly to set up. Where groups have not cooperated in the past or have even engaged in hostilities, as in much of Papua New Guinea, agreement on candidates among several parties is unlikely to occur. Furthermore, this fragmentation of the vote, where minute swings can change the electoral outcome, is one of the reasons for the insecurity of tenure of even those candidates who keep the promises to their supporters. The high incentives to defect from implicit contracts inherent in this environment explain the voters' need to protect themselves against defection by supporting candidates of their own group.



The nature of party organisation follows from the political behaviour of politicians and voters. The single-minded pursuit of material benefits, not distracted by general policy orientations, leaves parties as rent-seeking organisations whose members expect them to facilitate access to the resources of the state. Lacking any other organising principle that endows parties with coherence, they remain loose groupings organised around a leader that dissolve rapidly if the leader is unable to deliver. The factionalism inherent in such unstable personal groupings ensures the multiplicity of unstable parties that characterises Papua New Guinea's political system.

The party structure in turn explains the indifference of voters to the party allegiance of the candidates. Party membership of a candidate enters a voter's calculus if it affects the probability of receiving goods and services. This consideration strengthens the position of those candidates who belong to a party likely to be in government after the election. Since in Papua New Guinea it has generally been impossible to predict which parties will form the next government, party allegiance has been of no value as an indicator of future benefits. In showing little interest in the party allegiance of candidates throughout the post-independence period, voters have behaved according the clientelist script.

The mutual interaction of unbridled benefit-maximisers—the simple assumptions that underpin models of political clientelism—also has a bearing on another peculiarity of PNG politics, the so-called 'slush funds', monies allocated to MPs to be spent for designated purposes, although with a wide amount of discretion. As the MPs make the spending decisions, disbursement of these funds bypass regular administrative procedures (Dorney 2000:270–71; Pitts 2002:42). These funds, therefore, are an ideal instrument for channelling resources to

supporters (see, for example, Gordon and Meggitt 1985:183).

These 'slush funds' were established, with the provinces, in the 1970s when national MPs lost control over the 'visible services like schools and clinics to rural voters' (Larmour 1995:43). This meant that in the eyes of the electorate they had lost much of their *raison d'être*. 'Slush funds' were to make up lost ground (Standish 2002b:3–4). In this way, de-institutionalisation was legalised: the government eliminated due process by fiat.

The disastrous performance of many provincial governments provided a new opening for increasing MPs power of patronage. In 1995 the parliamentarians took over power from elected provincial assemblies and became provincial rulers as well (Standish 2002:4). This greatly enhanced their power of patronage, which now includes the positions at provincial level and the allocation of provincial funds that can be heavily influenced by national MPs who chair the decision-making committees (Standish 2004:14). This increase in the power of patronage illustrates one more characteristic of competitive clientelism: the ever-present pressure to provide particularistic rent to political supporters.

The political process in Papua New Guinea is pervaded by clientelist rent-seeking where politicians, in exchange for political support, are elected to provide particularistic benefits for their supporters. This leads to a highly fluid and inherently unstable political system with weak political parties, personalised and parochial politics, and intense political competition. It is generally agreed that the patronage politics has undermined governance and economic growth and reduced the material welfare of the voters. So why do voters behave in such a destructive manner, a manner that seems contrary to their long-term material interests?



The emergence of clientelist rent-seeking

Writings on Melanesian culture are an obvious place in which to look for an answer to the question of why clientelism emerged and still dominates political life. According to May, one characteristic of the 'Melanesian political style, rooted in Melanesian political culture' is that 'politics in modern Melanesia, even at the national level, is essentially personal and group politics' (May 1997:45). Political 'loyalties have tended to revolve around clan, local or ethnic divisions', a corollary of which is growing nepotism (May 1997:46). On this descriptive level, clientelist rent-seeking is simply an element of political culture. But what causes this political culture?

Morgan goes one step further by introducing the interaction between voters and politicians as the central element of a 'Melanesian political culture' that 'draws the attention of MPs away from their institutional responsibilities as lawmakers and overseers of government' (Morgan 2005:12). 'Ignoring the expectations of electors in favour of seemingly abstract principles of governance... might not be the best way for Melanesian MPs to be elected to parliament' (Morgan 2005:10). Although the interaction between voter's expectations and the behaviour of politicians now becomes the centre of attention, the analysis still does little to elucidate why clientelist rent-seeking evolved.

A different route to explaining voting behaviour leads to state-society interactions and the widespread contention that indigenous social forms have come to pervade the state at almost every level (Morgan 2005:4). More specifically, 'big man'-ship and gift-exchange are thought to have been transported into the realm of politics where they 'had a profoundly

debilitating and corrupting impact on state bureaucracies' (Dinnen 2001:191).

The political leader builds prestige and following through the gifting of grants, development projects, infra-structural services, and other resources to constituencies based around personalised associations. State gifting has become a means for constituting political bigman-ship and is most apparent in the electoral context... In this way, the insertion of a bigman model of leadership in Melanesian gift economy subverts the integrity and effectiveness of state institutions (Dinnen 2001:191).

The dominance of bigman-ship and gift exchange then calls for an explanation how these bigmen were able to mobilise voters through the politics of particularism.

Here perceptions of how politics is conducted may play a role in drawing voters towards particularistic benefits. There is some evidence for such a view; people perceive 'the state personified as a "bigman"' (Clarke 1997:81) who distributes 'favours for the electorates' (Townsend and Wamma 1983:232). Even if the state is not seen in such a personal fashion but is perceived as an abstract entity, the task of the MP, according to this understanding of politics, is to attract 'resources and money to start development projects in their area so that they can earn money and in turn spend this to advance their standard of living' (Sillitoe 1983:201).

The voter's propensity to drift into a clientelist voting pattern is supported by an additional factor, the extended social fragmentation of Papua New Guinea society, sometimes offered as a sufficient condition to explain the rent-seeking behaviour typically organised along clan and village lines. Thus May makes the small scale and the fragmentation of Melanesian societies responsible for the emergence of his



Melanesian political culture (May 1987:45), and 'ethnic fragmentation' provides the foundation of Reilly's analysis of dysfunctional PNG politics (Reilly and Phillpot 2002:915) where higher ethnic diversity is associated with lower overall levels of development (Reilly 2004).

A seemingly seamless story of the evolution of clientelist rent-seeking emerges: political behaviour was guided by ideas of bigman-ship and gift-exchange; voters expected to receive particularistic benefits organised by their representative in parliament; and, in the absence of local cooperation, every small group attempts to send forth their local candidate who is in charge of 'raiding the resources of the state'.⁸ However, the account is not entirely convincing. People do distinguish social contexts and are therefore unlikely to have transferred the experience of gift-exchange of the village wholesale into expectations of how national politics operates. Moreover, the notion of gifts flowing from the government to the locality does not necessarily lead to clientelist rent-seeking if the expected gains are confined to generalised benefits. In addition, there is some evidence that expectations immediately after independence were highly malleable,⁹ although some degree of patronage politics seems to have been employed already during the sessions of parliament in the pre-independence period (1964–1972) by the Australian administration attempting to strengthen its supporters (Standish 2004:14).

Even the fragmentation argument is not nearly as strong a reason for the emergence of clientelist voting patterns as it is sometimes suggested. In general, fragmentation simply describes a state of affairs where many small groups fail to cooperate effectively. The lack of institutional arrangements, such as relating to interest intermediation, was precisely what the modern state was supposed to remedy: providing the framework for inter-group

cooperation through the political and bureaucratic process in the form of its rules governing elections and the distribution of resources. Fragmentation as such does not explain why this system of cooperation has been rejected, it simply diagnoses *post hoc* that the project has failed to prevent destructive forms of political competition from emerging. For the fragmentation argument to become operational, it needs to specify how diversity generates clientelist behaviour, such as through a perception that to expect sustained successful cooperation with members of other groups is highly unrealistic—a notion that might well be widespread where clans are divided by deep-seated hostilities with violence never far from the surface. This would undoubtedly have facilitated clan-mobilisation and have effectively precluded cooperation. However, clientelism is a phenomenon not limited to the Highlands where inter-tribal conflict is most pronounced.

Strathern's explanation of what he calls 'retribalisation' opens the way for an explanation of predatory behaviour on an entirely different level: the weakness of the state itself. According to Strathern's view of political developments in the Highlands, politicians were seen as glorified local government councillors until, not long after independence, they

...learned the perks to be gained from switching their loyalties between factions in coalitions, and their image in the people's eyes began to shift from an idea of them strictly as 'servants of the people' to a notion that they were in power chiefly to serve themselves ... Given, then, that politicians were perceived as being rich and seemed to achieve their riches by virtue of being elected, and also that their promises to assist the people rang increasingly hollow or even ceased altogether, the next step for the electors was to ask,



'what's in for us?' This question no longer referred to collective benefits in the style of the politics of the 1960s (Strathern 1993:48).

The account suggests a historical movement from the idea of politicians as advocates of the collective good, to party politics and the 'venalities of factions and coalitions' and, finally, to the 'retribalisation of electorates and the full commoditisation of individual voting' (Strathern 1993:49).

Strathern has changed the causation: a state unable and unwilling to contain the venality of politicians causes clientelist voting behaviour and local conflict. This line of reasoning can be extended to include other weaknesses of the state that undermined its legitimacy and damaged its defences against the process of de-institutionalisation.

The failure of the state to enforce rules and regulations manifested itself in most spheres of political life shortly after independence, perhaps most dramatically in its inability to guarantee personal security after the imposition of an elaborate, country-wide legal system with neither sufficient funds nor the manpower to operate it effectively (Sinclair 2001; Pitts 2002:21–24). Events were repeated when provincial governments were introduced without the necessary experienced personnel. This, together with the increasing politicisation at all levels, damaged the integrity and capacity of the administration severely (Larmour 1995:41). At the same time, the state was unable or unwilling to develop and enforce property rights in land and natural resources as landowners began to call for 'compensation' outside the law (see, for example, Connell 1997:121–66). The loss in institutional strength contributed to the stagnation and deterioration of physical infrastructure and the quality of services in education and health. Such weaknesses delegitimised the modern state and exposed as increasingly hollow its claim of efficient and

impartial bureaucratic order supplying the population with public goods.

The loss of capacity was in part related to the anaemic economic growth after independence when a number of policy decisions—restrictions on foreign investment, combined with the increase in urban wages and legislation causing insecurity of property rights to land—impeded the expansion of key sectors of the formal economy. In turn, slow economic growth depressed the amount of tax revenues available for the delivery of public goods. The stagnant employment, combined with rapid population growth, played its part in increasing the demand for jobs in government that put enormous strains on the selection mechanism in the public sector that soon succumbed to *wantokism* (Kurer 2006).

Only a state thus weakened by policy decisions and the venality of the political elite offered the opening for what Gordon and Meggitt called 'upward colonisation', the infiltration of agencies of the state by indigenous forces.

Once a successful politician, public servant, or entrepreneur establishes such a bridgehead, other members of his clan exploit the entry and insert themselves in the administrative machinery, defending their positions by bringing accusations of *wantokism* against enemy clans (Gordon and Meggitt 1985:181).

Predatory voting may gain additional support from the values people attach to the local practices that infiltrate state institutions. Clientelist voting stands condemned by most definitions of corruption: it induces politicians to break laws and regulations; it is one of the rare cases where most people would agree that the practice is opposed to public interest; and it blatantly violates the impartiality principle according to which people from different ethnic groups ought to be treated equally by state institutions (Kurer 2005:223).



However, it has been suggested that these interpretations do not conform to the subjective understanding of corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999:91), and there is evidence of such sentiments in Papua New Guinea. 'A local political economy of sentiment (*wantokism*) informs the private or clan orbit' whereas the state can 'be exploited for commodities to enhance one's own prestige and that of the group' (Gordon and Meggitt 1985:157).

Such particularistic moral views have the familiar implication that refusing to help *wantoks* is both morally reprehensible and politically very difficult' (Gordon and Meggitt 1985:176), even if this involves breaking formal rules. On the other hand, there is an equal amount of evidence to the contrary: *wantokism* is widely condemned. Thus voter's attitudes to predatory rent-seeking seem to be highly ambiguous, torn between the traditional morality with its obligation to the members of the clan and a morality of the modern state that stresses the impartial treatment of all members of society. The unresolved conflict between the different sets of values is likely to be one of the causes for the emergence of clientelism.

The clientelist voting pattern, then, has been variously attributed to perceptions of the proper conduct of politics, the morality of particularism, and the venality of politicians. To these, the weakening of administrative processes of the state that damaged its legitimacy, including its enforcement mechanisms, have to be added. Explanations of the emergence of a clientelist voting pattern, however, have only a limited bearing on its persistence: ideas of the moral worth of particular political actions are liable to change; perceptions about how to conduct politics alter and the consequences of political action may be assessed differently. An account relying too heavily on the influence of 'traditional culture' is in danger of overlooking that people continuously

evaluate political behaviour and reassess its consequences, especially where dissatisfaction with the administrative performance is widespread, corruption is endemic, and inequality of income and wealth spreads rapidly.

The persistence of predatory rent-seeking

There are three possible ways to explain the persistence of clientelism

- collective action dilemmas prevent the articulation of people's interests
- values favouring particularistic behaviour lead to a time inconsistency problem, where the pursuit of the optimal long-term strategy is threatened by short-term considerations¹⁰ and
- voters may misjudge the consequences of predatory voting, failing to perceive the existence of alternative forms of politics or believe that these options are not available in practice.

The second and third points are related to 'political culture', defined narrowly as values and 'perceptions' that actuate political behaviour, where perceptions are the beliefs about how the world operates. The introduction of (imperfect) perceptions introduces the possibility of learning, the closer approximation of perceived to actual political options that are available and the means to attain them.

There is little doubt that the conflicting sets of morality described in the last section play a role in the continuation of clientelist politics. Given the nature of parochial morality, even a politician who promises generalised benefits and rejects individual handouts will be tempted to make 'exceptions' when approached by people able to exert social pressure (or employ sorcery) to get their way. We thus encounter



the familiar problem of time inconsistency, where the unswerving avoidance of clientelist practices is always threatened by backsliding.

Persistence of patronage politics is promoted by information problems if people fail to perceive the link between their predatory voting, institutional decay, and Papua New Guinea's economic calamities. Alternatively, voters may be unable to visualise alternative political processes that deliver superior outcomes where gains derived from additional collective goods outweigh the losses of particularistic benefits. Without voters being aware of the destructive consequences of predatory voting and without being able to visualise a state where resources are allocated according to administrative principles based on rules embodying a reasonable degree of fairness, there are no incentives to abandon clientelist voting.

Collective action problems may lead 'rational' voters to engage in predatory voting. Reilly and Phillpot describe a 'collective action dilemma' where clans 'play the role of small, self-contained interest groups' acting to secure their own interests and thereby harm 'the broader interests of society' (2002:925, 927). In this general formulation, however, it remains unclear why voters support these 'clan' representatives and their clientelist practices to begin with.¹¹

It is useful to state the collective action problem PNG voters face in the form of a prisoner's dilemma (Kurer 2001). By abandoning clientelist voting, they lose the chance of receiving particularistic benefits from their 'clan' representatives. This loss is compensated only if enough other voters change their behaviour at the same time and a candidate providing generalised benefits is elected. If this is not happening and the same corrupt politicians stay in power, voters lose the benefits from attaching themselves to patrons without gaining from the improvement in the delivery of public goods.

The severity of such a prisoner's dilemma is easily exaggerated. The pay-offs from supporting a candidate can be very small—a few kina or an occasional cheque to a village youth or church group (see Standish 2002a). Moreover, expected losses of particularistic benefits are much reduced if clan members are elected infrequently¹² and if the size distribution of the competing groups within a constituency varies, the dilemma may disappear altogether.¹³ It is precisely because returns from predatory voting are so small that voters might be tempted to try and experiment with politicians that promote generalised benefits.

There is another reason why the prisoner's dilemma might not be a binding constraint to a change of voting behaviour. The dilemma presupposes that voters do not suffer from information problems and that they believe the superior political alternative is available in practice. If voters perceive neither the connection between predatory voting and the current administrative and governance problems nor the existence of alternative forms of politics, there is no dilemma. Equally, it evaporates if voters are not convinced that the superior political alternative is available in practice.

In this last case, voters are able to conceptualise superior political alternatives but believe them to be out of reach. Such pessimism may be based on empirical generalisation, or it may be grounded in beliefs and observations. It might be thought that no politicians can be found who will not engage in self-enrichment and welfare-reducing clientelist politics,¹⁴ or that it is not possible to distinguish between politicians who engage in particularism and corruption and politicians who do not. Experience may well have taught voters to doubt that candidates can be found who do not succumb to the temptation of office and the pressure to promote primarily the interests of their 'clan'; moreover, the signalling problem is



severe when corrupt and non-corrupt politicians fight their election on anti-corruption platforms.

Such pessimism is not entirely unfounded for a further reason: the more advanced the institutional decay, the longer it will take for reform to be effective. Even a government devoted to public welfare, supported by a parliament with the best of intentions, will have difficulties in re-establishing law and order or a well-functioning health and education system. A slow change in voting pattern, the best than can be expected, will yield results only slowly. Thus there are a host of grounds for a mood of despondency that cements the *status quo* and leads to a feeling that the best a group can do is to run with what it can get in the short run, as in the case of a clan's decision to support a poorly educated candidate known to be corrupt because

[f]irst, the preferred candidate was a clan member, and second, he paid for the votes. The group believed the money they were paid would give them something more than they already had, reasoning that they had not received government services for the past five years and assuming they would not get any for the next five years (Pitts 2002:56).

Where the provision of public goods has effectively ceased, where the police are unable to reign in crime and clan warfare, where most children do not attend school regularly, teachers are regularly absent, basic teaching materials are unavailable and health posts and extension work have stopped operating effectively, the pursuit of particularistic benefits may not unreasonably be thought of as the course of action in the best interests of the voter. Thus the greater the institutional decay, the more deeply entrenched predatory voting becomes; expected institutional failures provide the incentives to continue clientelist voting patterns.

Such an 'entrenchment' suggests that clientelist voting patterns will continue to play a major role in voting behaviour; that therefore the pressure on institutional stability is unlikely to abate; and the fragility of the PNG state will persist in near future. Moreover, departure from patronage politics has become even more difficult through its institutionalisation in the form of legislative measures such as the 'slush' funds and the administration of the provinces.

Conclusion

PNG politics follows closely the clientelist script wherein voters and politicians maximise expected short-term material gains. The demand for particularistic benefits in turn undermines the stability of the political process, bureaucratic procedures, and the quality of governance. Persistence of clientelist voting is the result of a number of reinforcing factors. The particularistic demands are supported by a political culture whose valuation of corruption is highly ambiguous. They are possibly influenced by a prisoner's dilemma, but are more likely to originate in a lack of awareness of the consequences of particularistic rent-seeking and of political alternatives. Moreover, theoretical considerations and some evidence suggest that clientelist voting has been entrenched by structural factors such as the continued institutional decay that has fed perceptions that superior political alternatives are beyond reach. Unfortunately, the empirical evidence available does not allow an evaluation of these hypotheses. It can only be hoped that survey material becomes available that contains information about why voters continue to support politicians who neglect the provision of vital services but deliver highly particularistic benefits instead, and thereby undermine good governance and impoverish these very same voters.



Notes

- ¹ In 2002 the six largest parties would have barely been able to muster a majority in Parliament (54 out of 103 seats) (Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission, n.d.).
- ² The first Somare government (1972–77), which bridged independence, also lasted its full term.
- ³ For the changes in institutional arrangements see Reilly (2002a and 2002b).
- ⁴ This widely shared assumption may be an over-generalisation. Thus May (2002:157) finds that the votes of the two or three leading candidates in the East Sepik electorates were spread fairly widely.
- ⁵ One of the reasons for this insecurity is explored later in the paper.
- ⁶ The best known examples are Ted Diro and Bill Skate (Crocombe 2001; Standish 2004).
- ⁷ What is clearly not accepted is that a candidate only enriches himself (Zimmerman 1976:254).
- ⁸ In the felicitous words of a colleague, Sinclair Dinnen.
- ⁹ In the 1972 election, some candidates were elected who made extravagant promises; others were elected who made none at all; and there were reports that voters did not appreciate extravagant promises (see Stone 1976 but contrast, for example, Kuabaal (1976:362) and Stagg 1976:419–22).
- ¹⁰ A problem Ulysses avoids by self-binding in Elster's classical account (1977).
- ¹¹ There is the further problem of equating personal networks dealing in particularistic benefits with interest groups dealing in generalised benefits for the group as a whole. The modus operandi and the distributive outcome of these different types of rent-seeking are quite different.
- ¹² Consider the case where candidates are elected with 20 per cent of the votes, five clans are competing and one of their members is elected randomly. In this case, the turn of each group comes on average every five legislative periods. Given a reasonable discount rate and the degree of uncertainty, the returns to an average individual seem paltry.

- ¹³ To illustrate the point, take five clans with 30 per cent, 25 per cent, 20 per cent, 15 per cent and 10 per cent of the vote. This situation ought to result in a majority vote for generalised benefits since the smaller clans have an incentive to vote in this way.
- ¹⁴ Ethnic fragmentation will reinforce such perceptions. Where groups are deeply mistrustful of each other it may be difficult to believe that candidates will act for the benefit of the entire constituency.

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