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BOOK REVIEW

Patronage at Work: Public Jobs and Political Services in Argentina

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Virginia Oliveros's *Patronage at Work: Public Jobs and Political Services in Argentina* offers original insights into the interconnection between bureaucracy and electoral politics in countries where clientelism is prevalent. The book sets out to answer two important questions: (1) What types of work do patronage employees do for political parties? (2) Why do patronage employees refrain from reneging on party activism after they gain employment? The book's main theoretical contribution comes in answering the second question.

Oliveros argues that bureaucrats hired based on personal contacts will work hard to support incumbent politicians' reelection because of their shared fates. Ousting the incumbent increases the likelihood that patronage employees will either lose their jobs or be reshuffled into an inferior position. Oliveros terms this a *self-reinforcing* theory of patronage. Oliveros' argument takes seriously the agency of the employee: employees comply with the patron's wishes because it's in their best interest to do so. Her theory contrasts with work that suggests patronage employees work for parties through fear of punishment or because of feelings of gratitude.

Oliveros supports her argument with impressive hand-collected survey and interview data from Argentina. The Argentinian case is particularly relevant given the extensive literature on clientelism, focused most notably on the country's Peronist party (Auyero 2000; Stokes 2005; Levitsky 2007; Calvo and Murillo 2013; Weitz-Shapiro 2014; Szwarcberg 2012). Importantly, Argentina is not an outlier within the region, with patronage appointments common across many countries. Relevant to her theory, she also notes that politicians in Argentina are increasingly bypassing job security rules by using temporary appointments, a phenomenon noted in other countries such as Brazil (Colonnelli, Prem, and Teso 2020; Toral 2024) and Indonesia (Pierskalla and Sacks 2019). Within the literature on patronage, Oliveros' contribution stands out by explicitly quantifying the share of local public employees who engage in party activism and carefully documenting the range of activities bureaucrats perform for parties both during campaigns and in between elections.

Empirically, the text is centered on data from a large-scale survey of bureaucrats ($N = 1200$) working across three diverse urban municipalities. Two features make her data collection particularly impressive. First, by working closely with public authorities, she could randomly sample bureaucrats from the population of all public employees in the relevant municipalities. This enhances the representativeness of her study. Second, she takes threats to survey response bias seriously. Indeed, bureaucrats are likely to be cautious in openly admitting that they canvass or provide favors to citizens on behalf of incumbent politicians. To guard against such bias, Oliveros allows bureaucrats to self-administer "Survey Part B," which includes sensitive questions. Respondents then posted their responses in a ballot box, which Oliveros later linked to each respondent's demographic data. Additionally, she relies on list experiments to capture key statistics that answer her first research question.

Her survey and interview data, which she skillfully weaves together throughout the book's empirical chapters, highlight

various party activities undertaken by public sector employees. Specifically, across the full sample, she finds that 22% of bureaucrats helped the incumbent party during campaigns, 21% attended rallies, and 12% acted as election monitors. Dividing the sample between supporters of the mayor (a proxy for patronage employees), she shows that among supporters, these figures rise to 34%, 28%, and 27%, respectively. In other words, patronage employees are more likely to work on behalf of the party. A key contribution is to highlight the role of bureaucrats in delivering personal administrative favors to citizens during the electoral off-cycle, which she finds 44% of bureaucrats do, increasing to 57% among supporters. Favors typically involve opening doors or providing opportunities to citizens, for example, adding someone to a roster for a public welfare program (cited on p. 108) or calling the public ceremony to assist in funeral arrangements (cited on p. 109).

The main test of the theoretical argument comes in Chapter Six. Oliveros uses a survey experiment that exposed bureaucrats to a treatment that asks them to consider what would happen "if the incumbent mayor is not re-elected and the opposition wins?". Her results show that those exposed to this treatment are less likely to think they will keep their jobs. Furthermore, expectations of job losses are higher among party supporters, which highlights the shared fate between the patron and their clients.

Patronage at Work makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions and includes a wealth of qualitative insights into the operation of party machines in Argentina. It will become essential reading for students taking classes on topics related to governance and bureaucracy, as well as courses on elections and political parties. Indeed, the book is important in highlighting the role that patronage plays in securing parties' victories and extends the literature on voter mobilization and clientelism in democracies in the Global South.

The text also motivates future research on patronage. It is often challenging to obtain individual-level bureaucrat data (Brierley et al. 2023). However, future research must endeavor to do this and increasingly attempt to build panel data on the populations of bureaucrats across successive elections. Indeed, a missing element of *Patronage at Work* is demonstrating empirically that patronage employees' perceptions are correct and that many do lose their jobs when the local incumbent loses. An example of a recent paper that exploits overtime bureaucrat data and demonstrates rotation in public sector employees after elections is Toral (2024). Toral (2024) uses administrative data covering four election cycles in Brazil (2004–2016) and demonstrates that incumbent losses lead to dismissals in temporary employees and hiring more tenured bureaucrats during ousted politicians' lame-duck period. These hiring and firing practices are shown to have negative consequences for public service delivery. Another example is Pierskalla (2022) who pieces together the career trajectories of civil servants in Indonesia between 1980 and 2015. Using these data, he provides evidence that democratization increased politicians' demand for bureaucratic competence, with competent bureaucrats more likely to be promoted under democracy compared to during authoritarian rule.

Another area for future advancement is to disaggregate across public sector positions to see, first, at what level of the bureaucracy patronage appointees are most prevalent and, second, which types of bureaucrats engage in which kinds of party activities. Oliveros' use of list experiments prohibits such disaggregation. However, other recent research demonstrates that politicians' patronage strategies differ across bureaucratic ranks, which warrants further investigation (Hassan, Larreguy and Russell 2024; Brierley 2021).

Future research could also better analyze what municipal-level characteristics predict patronage. For example, the relationship between socioeconomic conditions, ethnic or partisan diversity, electoral competition, and patronage hiring. Better answering such questions again will likely involve constructing panel data of bureaucrats across municipalities. Panel data would allow scholars to include municipality-fixed effects in their analyses to gain better causal leverage. A challenge for scholars of patronage is to classify who is and who is not a patronage employee. Oliveros uses survey responses to code bureaucrats' partisanship, which she uses to proxy for their patronage status. Other work has proxied for bureaucrats' likely partisanship using attributes such as their ethnicity (Hassan 2020), home region (Brierley 2021) or history of campaign donations (Krause and O'Connell 2016). Scholars could combine survey data with advancements in machine learning to classify bureaucrats and apply these classifications to out-of-sample data.

Finally, one passing statistic worth further investigation is the revelation that 8% of public employees that the project sought to contact were not known to exist at their assigned places of work. The issue of "ghost workers" is well-known in the study of bureaucracy. Still, little empirical work takes on the task of investigating and better theorizing the existence of such ghosts. While difficult to study, given the significant monthly drain they cause on public resources, it would be fruitful for researchers to give this topic more attention.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

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