

Brown Bag Seminar

Influence, Patronage, and Power: Understanding the Dynamics of
Elite Collaboration in Electoral Competition

uni-siegen.de

Konstantinos Theocharopoulos

30. October 2024

US-A 016



Influence, Patronage, and Power: Understanding the Dynamics of Elite Collaboration in Electoral Competition

Abstract:

This paper presents a theoretical exploration into why and under what conditions politicians align with wealthy elite groups, often at the expense of broader public welfare, in the pursuit of electoral power. While supporting elite interests through political patronage can be costly, an alternative approach could involve favoring the broader public to gain more votes and reduce dependency on the elite. To investigate this dilemma, we construct a formal model of electoral competition wherein incumbents choose between self-reliant strategies or establishing a patronage system with a small, influential elite segment. In this model, elite support—comprising campaign contributions, biased media, and endorsements among others—is exchanged for a share of state resources, enhancing the incumbent's chances of victory but reducing the resources available for the incumbent's appropriation after the election. In the static model, two scenarios emerge based on the influence and demands of the elite. In cases of limited elite influence and modest expected payback, incumbents—regardless of their public support—avoid establishing a costly patronage system. However, when elite influence is high and expected payback is substantial, incumbents with low public support find it optimal to rely on elite support to boost their chances, while those with high support refrain, as the benefits of patronage do not justify its cost. The model is then extended to a dynamic game, where forward-looking incumbents, regardless of initial support levels, consistently opt for patronage as a strategy to secure prolonged tenure. In a further extension, where voters may be either informed (voting based on policy platforms) or uninformed (swayed by elite influence), the model predicts a higher likelihood of patronage when a significant share of voters is uninformed. The predictions of this model find empirical relevance in cases such as the regimes of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, where patronage systems have played a crucial role in maintaining political power.