

CLIENTELIST POLITICS IN NORTHEAST BRAZIL: BUREAUCRATS, SOCIAL WORKERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role of clientelism in the ways in which the state manifests itself and is imagined in the Brazilian Northeast region. We demonstrate how, in both electoral politics and public policies, personal relationships between state representatives – elected officials and public employees – and the poor segments of the population appear pivotal to understand how state resources are allocated and how the state is imagined in everyday life. To the background of the ‘classic’ power structures in Northeast Brazil characterized by strong rural patronage dating back to colonial times and a general outline of party politics in the area, we zoom in on more recent governance transitions – the return to democracy and the increase in anti-poverty and participatory programmes – and discuss the current entwining of democratic governance, citizenship and clientelist politics.

We analyse how clientelism works both within and outside electoral times – what Palmeira (1992) called ‘*tempo da política*’. Clientelism, in such an understanding, is rooted in practices, relationships and exchanges that are part of mechanisms that contribute to how social life gains shape. Within electoral times, we provide examples of how electoral campaigns are organized around (re-)establishing connections between political candidates and marginalized urban residents. We demonstrate how the elections are considered a ‘window of opportunity’ for residents to present their needs and aspirations to political candidates, and for brokers to gain access to otherwise unavailable resources. The connections between political candidates and the poor are, typically, mediated by different types of people in different positions, who operate as brokers. Outside electoral times, we focus on the clientelist dimension of public policies. The recent expansion of anti-poverty programmes – such as the Bolsa Família Programme – transformed the political landscape, creating a more formal institutionalized structure of public resources distribution, but also increasing the reach of elected officials’ influence among the poor through the allocation of social benefits depending, partly, on informal relationships.

In these examples and more generally, we highlight the role of political brokers. Such intermediaries, in Brazil, are not always directly connected to political parties. They can be community leaders or bureaucrats, who grant favours in exchange for political support. In electoral campaigns, individual politicians are often more prominent than political parties, especially considering that they are seldom recognized by their political ideologies.