

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC - Political clientelism and poverty

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Wednesday 13 February 2008, by [Edward D. Gonzalez-Acosta](#)

In May 2006, after voting in the congressional elections, my family and I went up to visit some relatives up in the mountains just south of Rio San Juan. There we played dominoes and were preparing a sancocho, when my cousin walked in very proudly telling us that she had just gotten RD\$500 for voting for the PLD. I was shocked, to say the least, but my relatives went on to tell me that it was not uncommon for all the parties to give out money and other material benefits for votes or joining in a campaign activity. When I asked them whether they cared about the policies of the parties, they ALL responded, "No, they (the parties) are all the same. They come around during elections, and never again. If I can get a few pesos for voting, then that's enough for me."

This is, for better or worse, the current state of politics in the DR, and what political parties count on and support in order to maintain the paternalistic politics that has reigned in the DR since 1865 – yes since 1865.

What is vote buying? Vote buying, as the anecdote above suggests, is the handing out to voters of cash or minor material goods by political parties in exchange for the recipient's vote. Political parties tend to target the poor, because the poor, in their precarious economic state, are often more desperate for resources than the middle class. Low income, according to a 2004 study on vote buying conducted by Susan Stokes, is the key factor in vote buying.

Vote buying is a form of political clientelism. Political clientelism is an exchange system based on political subordination in exchange for the discretionary granting of available public resources and services. In other words, political parties/candidates say "support me, and I will give you money, a government job where the pay is high and the work is low; a taxi (pollito); a metro; access to state contracts; or anything else that I can." The logic of clientelism, in essence, is that the winner will favor those who supported him/her, and those that did not will find a "closed" door when they go knocking for help.

Clientelist networks, at the local level, are supported by a thick network of "brokers" – community leaders – who are given privileged access to the "municipality" or "Party" to help his/her community. These "brokers" can be leaders of neighborhood associations or party activists. They act as a filtering mechanism to funnel resources to the party supporters. So when Doña Maria does not have enough money to pay for prescriptions, she goes to the neighborhood association asking for help; if she is a party supporter she gets some help, if she is not, tough luck!

Political clientelism helps support some of the negative aspects of Dominican democracy: 1) the winner takes all political mentality; 2) the paternalistic nature of Dominican politics; and 3) chronic inequality and poverty. Political parties try to buy their way into office, and if they win, they try to pay even more supporters for their continued help.

The state becomes the ultimate price. If you win, then you can divide the "pie" as you see fit. You can take out huge loans to buy taxis for the union that supported you; or you can take out even BIGGER loans to pay your biggest campaign supporter to build a metro. The point is, if I win, those who supported me will also win, and opponents will be "locked out."

Jonathan Hartlyn's excellent analysis of the political history of the DR accurately labels the Dominican

politics as Neo-Patrimonial. Neopatrimonialism exists whenever political leaders develop an administration and military force which are purely personal instruments of the master. The key traits of this type of political system seem very prominent in the DR. First, in neopatrimonialism, politics is not easily identified along ideological or programmatic issues. "Rather, conflict is often better characterized as simply between "ins" versus "outs" over spoils and patronage. Thus, parties tend to be deeply personalized, with an emphasis on clientelism and brokerage" (p.15 of Hartlyn's "The Struggle for Democratic Politics in the Dominican Republic"). Second, Parties are deeply personalized, and the government is dominated by the president – which reinforced patrimonial regimes.

Third, opposition parties focus on decisions and behaviors by the "ruling" party that are illicit or transgress "decency"; but when the opposition gains power, they reproduce the same actions they repudiated in the previous administration. The New ruling party, which criticized corruption and clientelistic distribution of resources in the previous administration, now turns away from its promise to institute the "rule of law" to the same patrimonial, clientelistic, ill-transparent, and exclusive customs practiced by the old administration. Lastly, neopatrimonialism inhibits the effective exercise of the rule of law, efficiency of the state bureaucracy, and the public's access to justice and rights.

Today's Dominican political system, for worse, exhibits many of the traits of neopatrimonialism and political clientelism. Furthermore, the political institutions that exist (both formal and informal) support these practices and block any change from occurring. The media are aligned with and controlled by the main paternalistic party interests, and exclude the voices of political parties that seek CHANGE. The electoral processes, in that they do not foster the presentation of political platform or public debates of policies, also support neopatrimonialism and clientelistic practices.

As for poverty, political clientelism has a vested interest in maintaining a large portion of the population poor. As I explained above, the poor are more susceptible to clientelistic practices. They are the most likely to be willing to exchange their vote for money or access to resources in the future. If the DR builds a strong middle class, then the significance of the support that comes from

clientelistic practices will decrease. Similarly, because some elites benefit from ill-transparent access to government resources/contracts (e.g. Diandino Peña), the country accrues these gargantuan loans for projects that may have been allotted to another contractor that was less expensive. So the message for the poor and elites are the same – when you support the winner, you get material benefit; everyone else is screwed.

I hope that the implications of political clientelism and neopatrimonialism on Dominican politics are obvious. These practices support each other and have created institutions to protect their continuity, at the cost of effective representation, economic development, development of an effective state bureaucracy, access to justice, and transparency. The major political leaders and parties will not change the status quo. They benefit from clientelistic practices that keeps them in power, and from the neopatrimonialistic nature of Dominican politics that gives extraordinary power to the party that wins the presidency.

However, We the people who are tired of extreme poverty and inequality; who are tired of being shut out by parties that refuse to provide a list of policies they will adopt when elected; who are tired of elected officials that can decide to raise their salaries 300% to buy SUVs, or fund NGOs that get millions of pesos but do nothing for the people... We the people need to stand up and demand change, look for alternative political movements that turn away from the clientelistic politics. We need to support leaders who will listen to us and include us in decision making processes. To that end, I encourage you not to remain complacent but to conduct your own research about the other political movements that exist in the DR. If the PLD, PRD, and PRSC won't listen to us, then we need to turn our backs on them, regardless of how much money they offer us.

We don't want money— we want an effective voice; we want to be included; we want justice and transparency; we want human rights for all; we want reliable public services (education, health, parks, water, sanitation, transportation, security); we want this for all people regardless of sexuality, gender,

economic status, nationality, mental capacity, or age. And more important, we want to be active partners in the realizing these goals that will help create a more perfect Dominican society.