

New Topics and Debates in the Study of Political Clientelism

Nuevos temas y debates en el estudio del clientelismo

■ Cruz Parceró, Luz María (2022) *Clientelismo, redes e intermediaciones. Coordinadas para el debate*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México ■

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Received: August 12th, 2024

Accepted: May 8th, 2025

Introduction

The study of political clientelism has advanced toward new theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches within the social sciences, which have expanded explanations of the phenomenon beyond forced, unequal, and purely material exchanges. The book by Dr. Luz María Cruz Parceró, titled *Clientelismo, redes e intermediaciones. Coordinadas para el debate*, aligns with these emerging lines of research, as it offers a review of the various perspectives from which clientelism has been studied and also puts forward a comprehensive proposal to approach the phenomenon in contemporary contexts. Rather than framing this analytical category solely as a problem for the development of citizenship and democracy, the author argues that clientelism “transforms and acquires a hybrid character [...] making it necessary

to understand the complexity of associative networks that reveal spaces with forms of exchange that are balanced, emancipatory, and developed under more equitable conditions”, as is the case in more plural systems transitioning toward democracy (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 6).

Cruz Parceró’s work, which derives from her research project “Repensar el clientelismo en la democracia moderna”, provides relevant insights into the ways the concept of clientelism has evolved, as well as the theoretical contents that have granted it an interdisciplinary character by bringing together political science, sociology, anthropology, and history. It also highlights the methodologies that have produced new empirical contributions to its study, primarily in Latin America and particularly in Mexico.

The following section will present the main contributions of this book, its placement

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within the field of clientelism and political work studies, and the new lines of inquiry that the author invites us to pursue.

Rethinking clientelism

Clientelismo, redes e intermediaciones. Coordinadas para el debate is a work that proves invaluable to readers seeking a thorough grasp of the topic. It offers a meticulous review of the diverse approaches, methodologies, and contemporary debates that have redefined clientelism studies, demonstrating that the concept—rather than serving solely as a negative label for a political practice—also constitutes a mode of citizen participation that contributes to the construction of citizenship. Precisely for this reason, the author draws on the notion of “hybridization”, acknowledging that clientelism cannot be disentangled from its links to corruption or caciquismo (authoritarian bossism).

The book is equally significant for scholars and students already specialized in the subject, as Dr. Cruz Parceró lays out a “renewed agenda” for addressing clientelism, incorporating topics and theories capable of explaining the phenomenon’s complexity in contemporary Latin American—and specifically Mexican—contexts.

In Chapter Three, the driving question that guides the author’s analytical model is posed: “Can contemporary clientelistic relationships serve to strengthen pluralism and democracy?” (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 45). To answer it, she organizes the new debates on clientelism into three lines of inquiry:

- a) Re-examining the concept to account for more complex relationships—understood as modes of “political exchange, participation, and intermediation” that combine traditional forms of co-optation and corruption (typical of authoritarian or cacique-style systems) with negotiation and deliberation (characteristic of pluralistic societies) (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 45, 47).
- b) Conceiving clientelism as a form of citizen participation. Here, the author argues that it is essential to identify the conditions and mechanisms that make such participation possible; government–citizen linkages interact in pursuit of “social inclusion” through entrepreneurship and an active civil society (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 45, 49).
- c) Explaining gendered relations, highlighting women’s fundamental role as grass-roots operators, and exposing the barriers they face in obtaining formal positions within party structures or adequate remuneration. Studying women’s labor requires mapping the support networks through which social capital is built, both in pre-electoral periods and during electoral processes (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 45, 52).

Overall, the author aims to broaden the content of clientelism in plural societies, thereby explaining the adaptations the phenomenon has undergone—breaking the theoretical confines that have reduced it to a moral problem of corruption. This task demands attention to “informal routes” that shed light on dialogues

among formal institutions, where demands are negotiated and particular interests integrated into public agendas.

The theoretical underpinning of informality rests on two key pillars: Robert K. Merton's notion of "replacement structures" and Guillermo O'Donnell's debate on "formally and informally institutionalized democracies". In addition, the author weaves three perspectives into her analytical framework that, she argues, have significantly advanced understanding of clientelism: *a*) rational-choice and neo-institutionalist approaches, *b*) network theory, and *c*) collective-action theory" (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 8, 13, 21, 23).

Locating the book within clientelism and political work studies

This work positions itself squarely within contemporary research on clientelism and political work. A lively debate currently questions whether the term clientelism should be replaced by less value-laden concepts —such as intermediation or grass-roots political work— given its negative connotations. Cruz Parceró, however, argues for deepening and expanding the concept itself. Etymologically, clientelism derives from the Latin *clientem*, accusative of *cliens* ("client, protégé" —implying "a person who relies on another"; Cruz Parceró, 2022: 8). On that basis, she contends that the phenomenon can —and should— be examined as a form of citizen participation, of citizenship building, and of social-capital formation, because its essence lies in constructing support networks.

Hence, adopting alternative terms is, in her view, unnecessary.

Along this path, the book aligns with contributions by scholars such as Javier Auyero (2021), Gabriel Vommaro and Hélène Combes (2019), Mariela Szwarcberg (2016), and Héctor Tejera (2016), who have opened new dimensions for studying clientelism: the informal relations through which exchanges are built; the sexual division of political labor; and the moral, normalized logics —dubbed "political-cultural practices"— that intermediaries forge with citizens.

Cruz Parceró's distinctive contribution to this body of scholarship is a "renewed agenda" that incorporates: clientelism as a vehicle for participation and citizenship construction; the visibility of women's roles within the gendered division of political labor and the inequalities and barriers emerging from informal institutions and practices; and the insight that clientelism can generate social capital. Consequently, the phenomenon should not be viewed merely as a means for elites or organizations to accumulate political capital; intermediaries and citizens within exchange networks also reap individual and collective benefits, even fostering a participatory citizenry.

Regarding social-capital formation, the author proposes a "basic schema of clientelist fabric" that distinguishes internal and external dimensions *vis-à-vis* the individual or collective logics of actors and social organizations. This framework helps capture the complexity of clientelist phenomena in contemporary societies marked by greater pluralism and autonomy from the state (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 30).

The book also elucidates the Mexican context. Beginning with the post-revolutionary period, Cruz Parceró shows how clientelism adapts to systemic change—from the corporatist system founded by the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) (later the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI]) to the democratic transition that ushered in political pluralism among parties and civil-society organizations. She traces these adaptations in shifting patron-client relations, contrasting authoritarian or vertical forms (*caciquismo*) with horizontal arrangements that allow negotiation between patrons and clients. At this juncture, she suggests that clientelist practices may generate social capital, insofar as they “analyze the factors that affect individuals’ capacity to solve collective-action problems linked to economic and political development” (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 41).

A further contribution is her proposal for identifying changes between traditional or authoritarian (rural) clientelism and plural or horizontal (urban) clientelism. The key lies in the asymmetric nature of clientelist ties—familial, personal, or collective—defined along axes of freedom or obligation and traversed by formal and informal rules of the political system (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 35, 36, 38).

Invitation to build a “renewed agenda”

The book *Clientelismo, redes e intermediaciones. Coordinadas para el debate* does not offer a traditional conclusion; rather, it extends an invitation to reflect on a “renewed

agenda”, which consists of systematizing the contributions of new research that has centered on what the author terms “the other institutionalization” (Cruz Parceró, 2022: 53–55).

In this sense, the book provides a detailed theoretical and methodological review of how the study of clientelism has evolved and what new theories, approaches, and methodologies have emerged. However, the book leaves pending a practical application of the author’s proposed framework. This omission does not preclude the possibility that Dr. Cruz Parceró herself—or a future reader—might take up the task of testing the book’s proposal in an empirical study.

The text also briefly mentions advances in research on clientelism from within this renewed agenda in Mexico and Latin America. Nevertheless, this aspect remains underdeveloped: the book does not specify which thematic focuses or conceptual frameworks have been explored in existing case studies—whether at local, national, or regional levels. Thus, the author leaves open a line of debate that she does not pursue further, acknowledging that it lies beyond the book’s scope, but suggesting fertile ground for future research in the region.

Conclusions

As its title suggests—coordinates for the debate—the book fulfills its purpose as a guide for identifying current debates on clientelism. It redefines the concept through a hybrid perspective that helps to grasp both the

limitations and the potential contributions of this political practice in building citizenship and social capital.

Finally, the author calls on researchers to contribute to the construction of a “renewed agenda” that, from the vantage point of informality, integrates new elements into the study of clientelism —particularly those related to networks and intermediation— as well as the incorporation of a gender perspective into the debate.

About the author

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“La revocación de mandato y rendición de cuentas social en las alcaldías Xochimilco y Miguel Hidalgo de la Ciudad de México en 2023” (2025) *Revista Estudios Políticos* (64); (with Martha Singer) “Movimientos en red” (2024) in Georgina Sosa and Karolina Gilas, *¿Cómo estudiar comunicación política? Nuevas miradas a los conceptos centrales*. DGAPA-UNAM; “Participación política de las mujeres desde la informalidad, el caso de las operadoras de base de la Ciudad de México” (2022) *Cognita. Revista Política, Gobierno y Sociedad* (8).

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