

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

8-2023

Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia

Sebastian Carl DETTMAN

Singapore Management University, sdettman@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Citation

DETTMAN, Sebastian Carl.(2023). Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52(4), 742-744.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/3786

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cheryl@smu.edu.sg.

Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia. By Edward Aspinall, Meredith L. Weiss, Allen Hicken, and Paul D. Hutchcroft. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xii, 380 pp. ISBN: 9781316513804.

Book Review published in *Journal of Asian Studies* (2023), 82 (4), 742-744.

DOI: 10.1215/00219118-10773591

The study of patron-client relationships has long been a concern of scholars of Southeast Asia. Some of the most influential studies of patron-client relationships, such as James Scott's and Carl Landé's foundational work on patron-client relationships in Malaysia and the Philippines, have significantly shaped the global literature on patronage. Even as Southeast Asia has undergone massive socioeconomic changes over the past several decades, patronage remains key to understanding politics and elections in Southeast Asia.

Mobilizing for Elections is an exciting and ambitious mapping of the contours of modern patronage in the region. The book provides a conceptual framework to understand patronage in the context of electoral mobilization and answers a variety of questions about the mechanics and patterns of patronage in Southeast Asia: what kinds of patronage are distributed and how, the response of voters to patronage, and variation within and across the cases they consider. The authors examine patterns of what they call "electoral mobilization regimes" in three primary cases: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with additional evidence provided from Singapore, Thailand, and Timor Leste.

The scope and size of the project is far-reaching. Over a decade, the four authors, along with a network of two hundred local scholars and researchers, conducted fieldwork during multiple elections and interviewed over three thousand politicians, party staff, and patronage brokers. This "extensive political ethnography," as the authors term it, is complemented by nationally representative surveys conducted in the three countries. The current book is a synthesis of findings of their broader research project, which has already generated multiple journal articles, dissertations, and edited volumes.

The authors adopt a capacious definition of patronage, covering a wide variety of ways in which citizens, both individually and collectively, are enmeshed in material relationships with politicians. Their study covers manifestations of patronage including vote buying, patronage jobs, development projects, and "hijacked" benefits from state programs. The book helpfully places this panoply of relationships within a theoretical framework, distinguishing the geographic level of aggregation at which patronage takes place. The conceptual work is complemented by extensive empirical evidence and rich ethnographic detail, providing information about how brokerage networks are constructed, the going rate for vote buying in various contexts, and how politicians and voters perceive the goals and utility of patronage.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are often analyzed from the perspective of patronage politics. Yet the methods and channels of patronage, as the authors document, are substantially different. In Indonesia, patronage is organized and distributed through ad hoc electoral networks known as *tim sukses* (success teams). The Philippines is characterized by largely family-based political machines which endure beyond single elections. In Malaysia, patronage is primarily distributed through political parties and coalitions, with much less of the individual/household-targeted resource distribution that characterizes the other two cases. The authors attribute these differences to colonial political structures, the course of postcolonial politics, and electoral institutions. Throughout the book, the authors carefully contrast the cases, highlighting similarities and differences and discussing subnational variation within each of the countries. The three cases also generate a typology of electoral mobilization regimes that can be applied beyond their cases.

The book is filled with important and surprising empirical findings. To take one example, in Indonesia and the Philippines politicians spend generously to provide material benefits to individual voters but make very little effort to ensure that recipients actually vote for them. Indeed, the authors' survey evidence shows that voters

themselves feel little to no obligation to support a politician, even if they received a benefit. This is puzzling, considering a large portion of the literature argues that patronage serves to persuade or mobilize voters, and that politicians pay great attention to making sure that voters follow through. What explains their finding? The authors argue that these patronage relationships are not a primarily a method of ensuring voter compliance. Instead, patronage operates as a way for politicians to increase name recognition, to advertise that they are a serious candidate capable of marshaling resources, and to hold onto existing clients. These findings contribute a new perspective to the study of patronage in Southeast Asia and for the broader comparative literature on the subject.

The sheer variety of politician-voter relationships described in the book sometimes makes it difficult to pin down their implications. The theoretical framework encompasses illegal activity such as vote buying but also actions such as politicians directing infrastructure projects to their community or using state-allocated constituency development funds to benefit specific groups of voters, sometimes without any expectation of an immediate voting payoff. Yet building village roads or paying for mobile health clinics (both examples from the book) have more positive welfare effects compared to a household receiving a bag of rice and a small cash handout once in a five-year election cycle. While the former is often condemned as pork barrel politicking, it is also ubiquitous in “developed” democracies. The variable consequences of these patronage relationships, apart from the ideal-typical model of programmatic politics, could be interrogated more.

The main purpose of the book, as stated by the authors, is not to examine in detail the implications of patronage on the quality of governance or democracy. That being said, they do discuss a number of its corrosive effects, from politicians redirecting public resources to favored beneficiaries, to undercutting class-based mobilization of the poor in favor of direct benefits. The book also makes clear that money, and lots of it, remains a key criterion for access and influence in electoral politics in the countries under study. In sum, this study is an important theoretical and empirical contribution to the study of patronage in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Sebastian Dettman

Singapore Management University