Erik Wibbels abstract

"Networks, Clientelism and Public Services: Evidence from the Slums of Udaipur"

Guadalupe Rojo

Erik Wibbels

For many of the world’s poor, politics is characterized by clientelistic exchange. Most work on clientelism posits a one-off, direct exchange of voters for private benefits between individual voters and a politician; such theorizing is associated with empirical work that models individual political behaviour as independent. Yet the poor tend to be clustered together in neighborhoods and many of their starkest needs (such as access to water and a public toilet) are provided publically, not via private exchange. As such, we conceptualize slums as social and political networks populated by voters and local political brokers. We are that where those networks are dense, voters and political brokers are able to coordinate votes for public services. Resource-constrained urban politicians allocate scarce, expensive local public goods to those slums that serve as reliable vote banks, i.e. those characterized by dense social and political networks. In our account, the political and social organization of slums condition distributive politics and thereby who among the poor gets access to basic public services. Our theoretical approach to understanding urban politics implies a network-based empirical approach and diverges from the standard practice of treating poor voters as i.i.d. (i.e. as independent observations rather than as members of neighbourhoods). We test these ideas in the context of two rounds of surveys of 28 slums in Udaipur, India.