

# Democratization

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

## Dissatisfied, uninformed or both? Democratic satisfaction, political knowledge and the acceptance of clientelism in a new democracy

Sergiu Gherghina, Inga Saikkonen & Petar Bankov

To cite this article: Sergiu Gherghina, Inga Saikkonen & Petar Bankov (2022) Dissatisfied, uninformed or both? Democratic satisfaction, political knowledge and the acceptance of clientelism in a new democracy, *Democratization*, 29:2, 211-231, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2021.1947250](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1947250)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1947250>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 07 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 876



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Dissatisfied, uninformed or both? Democratic satisfaction, political knowledge and the acceptance of clientelism in a new democracy

Sergiu Gherghina <sup>a</sup>, Inga Saikkonen <sup>b</sup> and Petar Bankov <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; <sup>b</sup>Social Science Research Institute, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

## ABSTRACT

In many countries, voters are targeted with clientelistic and programmatic electoral offers. Existing research explores the demand side of clientelism, but we still know very little about what determines voters' acceptance of clientelistic and programmatic electoral offers. This article builds a novel theoretical framework on the role that democratic dissatisfaction and political knowledge play in shaping voters' acceptance of different types of electoral offers. We test the implications of the theory with a survey experiment conducted after the 2019 local elections in Bulgaria. Our results show that low-knowledge voters and those who are dissatisfied with the performance of democracy and democratic institutions are more likely to accept clientelistic offers from politicians. The findings contribute to the literature on electoral clientelism and political attitudes.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 24 March 2021; Accepted 18 June 2021

**KEYWORDS** Clientelism; programmatic politics; acceptance; democratic dissatisfaction; political knowledge

## Introduction

Electoral clientelism, defined as the provision of particular material rewards in exchange for electoral support,<sup>1</sup> is widespread in contemporary societies. It has gradually become an important component of many elections in new democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes. In this context, we know much about the supply side of clientelism. Extensive research explores why political actors use clientelism, how it works and develops over time, and what are its forms.<sup>2</sup> There is somewhat less information about the demand side of clientelism and how voters perceive clientelism. Previous studies have investigated voters' access to resources, ideological position, preferences for brokers and perceptions of efficacy.<sup>3</sup> So far, the demand side has been investigated through the lenses of choices made by voters when exposed to clientelism. However, we know very little about how willing voters are to accept clientelistic practices. Information about these attitudes is relevant because it sheds light on society's openness

**CONTACT** Sergiu Gherghina  [sergiulor@yahoo.com](mailto:sergiulor@yahoo.com)

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

towards clientelism, reveals the anchor that clientelism may have in the political culture and could help predicting the behaviour of political actors in the future.

This article addresses this gap in the literature and aims to explain why voters may accept electoral clientelism and programmatic policy offers. To this end, we build a theoretical framework that differentiates between positive clientelistic exchanges, negative (coercive) clientelistic exchanges and programmatic inducement in terms of their expected “returns” to the voter as well as the broader implications of the exchange. Based on this theoretical framework, we formulate a series of testable hypotheses about the effects of democratic satisfaction and political knowledge on voter acceptance of electoral clientelism and programmatic politics. First, we expect that voters’ acceptance of clientelistic targeting is shaped by their perceptions of how well the political system and political institutions function. We expect that highly dissatisfied voters are more susceptible to particularistic benefits offered by clientelistic exchanges in contrast with the more uncertain benefits offered by programmatic voting. Second, we expect that voters’ political knowledge and their understanding of the implications of these various types of electoral exchanges shapes their acceptance of electoral targeting, and that clientelistic offers are more likely to resonate with low-knowledge voters.

We bring empirical evidence from a vignette experiment conducted in Bulgaria on a nationally representative sample of 1155 citizens in the aftermath of the 2019 local elections. In the experiment, the respondents were presented with scenarios where local politicians targeted them with different types of clientelistic and programmatic inducements. Survey experiments are particularly well suited to test voter responses to these kinds of sensitive questions because they avoid the social desirability bias that often complicates the analysis of standard survey responses.<sup>4</sup> Bulgaria is the appropriate setting for our study because clientelism plays a relevant and long-lasting role in local governance and elections (see the Research Design section).

This article contributes to the literatures on political behaviour and on electoral clientelism. Our results broaden the understanding about how democratic dissatisfaction and political knowledge can influence voters’ behaviour beyond political participation. It is the first attempt to analyse the effects on citizens’ acceptance of clientelism and programmatic inducements. The dissatisfaction with representative democracy is high throughout the world<sup>5</sup> and this attitude has been traditionally linked with the propensity (not) to participate in politics. Political knowledge is another central individual level cognitive characteristic that has been often linked with political participation. We show that the two variables have far-reaching impact on citizens. We also contribute to the emerging literature challenging the assumptions about voters as passive targets of clientelism.<sup>6</sup> Earlier studies show that voters’ perceptions on clientelism are mediated by their socio-economic resources or access to information.<sup>7</sup> Our analysis shows how cognitive traits impact the acceptance of clientelism when socio-economic variables are controlled for. Finally, the new literature on the “demand side of clientelism” has mainly focused on voters’ responses to positive inducements, such as vote buying. Consistent with earlier works, we distinguish theoretically and empirically between positive and negative types of clientelism and show that voters react to these offers in different ways.<sup>8</sup>

The next section reviews the literature on electoral clientelism and programmatic politics. It formulates four sets of testable hypotheses that correspond to general and specific dissatisfaction and knowledge. We present next the research design with emphasis on the data, variables and methods. The fourth section interprets the main

findings of our analysis. The conclusions discuss the main implications of our results and elaborate on directions for further research.

## Electoral clientelism and programmatic politics

Party system theories distinguish between two types of linkages between politicians and voters. Types of “affective psychological attachments” include linkages based on party identification, descriptive representation (e.g. based on gender or ethnicity) and “charismatic” linkages. In contrast, programmatic politics and clientelism are both “rational and deliberative” modes of political linkage between the politicians and voters.<sup>9</sup> In positive clientelistic exchanges, voters are offered various benefits in return to their vote: goods, money, preferential access to jobs or welfare services.<sup>10</sup> Negative clientelism is based on a punishment for voting the “wrong” way, reflected in threats to lose the job or the access to welfare benefits.<sup>11</sup> Programmatic politics is defined as the process of mobilizing social and/or electoral support on the basis of a set of proposed policies and we contrast it with clientelism because of its form and goals. On the one hand, programmatic politics articulates a plan for achieving mid-to long-term goals, which is available for the public to consider and used by voters to hold elected officials accountable. On the other hand, positive and negative clientelism are means with short-term effects, used for the mobilization of individual voters without any broader goals beyond securing the election of the respective candidate. These three forms differ in several other ways. The following lines outline the core features of these forms along three analytical dimensions: the universalism of the transaction, utility for voters and cognitive capacity required (Table 1).

Electoral clientelism and programmatic politics differ in their mode of distribution and the degree of universalism of the exchanges.<sup>12</sup> Both clientelism and programmatic politics are based on transactions between politicians and voters, where politicians promise voters some kinds of goods in return for their support. In programmatic politics, the benefits are distributed universally by publicly available criteria.<sup>13</sup> However, the benefits delivered by programmatic politics can be uncertain and depend on the politicians’ ability and capacity to deliver them (as well as the politicians’ willingness to commit to electoral promises in the first place). Therefore, programmatic politics has sometimes been characterized as a relatively low-expected benefits kind of activity.<sup>14</sup>

In positive forms of clientelism benefits are distributed on a particularistic and *quid pro quo* manner.<sup>15</sup> Negative clientelism, too, is based on particularistic exchanges as voters are threatened with a punishment that is contingent on voting behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Both positive and negative clientelistic offers are typically mediated by brokers, i.e. intermediaries who coordinate clientelistic politics at the local level.<sup>17</sup> Both vote buying and voter coercion are illegal in most electoral codes in the world.

The three types of exchanges differ with respect to the degree of utility provided to the voter.<sup>18</sup> Positive forms of clientelism and programmatic politics are both

**Table 1.** Differences between electoral exchanges.

	Universalism	Utility for voters	Cognitive capacity required
Positive clientelism	Low	High	Low
Negative clientelism	Low	Low	Low
Programmatic politics	High	Intermediate	High

transactional modes of exchanges, and they both increase the utility of the voter – voters get something in return for their vote. In both cases, the personal situation improves because of their decision. While in the case of programmatic politics an individual voter obtains something as a result of the implemented policies of the elected official, in positive clientelism they obtain it because of a personal agreement. In contrast, negative clientelism is based on threatening the voter with some kind of a sanction if they do not vote in a particular way, and thus does not increase the utility of the voter.<sup>19</sup> This is because in negative clientelism the promise is not to improve voters' situation, but rather to keep the status quo in return for their vote.

These three types of electoral exchanges differ in the degree of cognitive capacity required to understand the mechanisms of the exchange. Positive forms of clientelism present the voters with a rather simple electoral transaction – receiving some kinds of goods in return of their vote. In such circumstances, the voters have the freedom to assess whether the thing that is being offered to them is of their personal benefit and the extent this is the case. More importantly, they have the freedom to choose whether to accept the offer or not without any significant repercussions for themselves. This stays in contrast to negative clientelism. It is based on explicit threats and the mechanism of the exchange is easy to understand. Here, the voter assesses the value of the particular utility they have and that is under threat of losing. Hence, in contrast to positive clientelism they have less freedom in their choice, given that should they reject the offer, there will be noticeable effects on their personal situation. In contrast, programmatic politics is much more complex, and requires a lot of knowledge and informational resources to understand.<sup>20</sup> This particularly concerns the voter's analysis on the feasibility of the proposed programme, its potential effects on them, as well as on assessment on the potential of the elected party to implement their programme, for example. In such situation and in contrast to the cognitive choices in clientelist exchanges, their choice in programmatic exchanges depends not only on analysis of the outcomes from the direct interaction between them as a voter and the party that makes the offer, but also on their analysis of the external circumstances that underpin the offer.

Based on these distinctions we form a set of testable hypotheses on how two central cognitive characteristics of voters, democratic satisfaction and political knowledge, shape voters' acceptance of these different scenarios.

### ***Democratic dissatisfaction and institutional performance***

Earlier research indicates that citizens develop different attitudes towards the political system and specific political institutions.<sup>21</sup> These rest on different principles that we argue can influence the acceptance of clientelism. Satisfaction with the performance of democracy refers to voters' evaluations on how well the democratic institutions are functioning in a given country and falls somewhere between Easton's diffuse and specific support for democracy.<sup>22</sup> The gap between the democratic expectations of citizens and their judgements on how well the democratic system functions is wide in new democracies.<sup>23</sup> Voters' level of democratic satisfaction can influence their acceptance of different types of electoral targeting for several reasons.

Democratic dissatisfaction has widely been associated with the rise of populism and anti-establishment voting in many of the world's democracies.<sup>24</sup> Dissatisfaction with democracy is likely to have other consequences for democratic governance. As stated previously, both positive and negative forms of clientelism are illegal in most

electoral codes of the world, and citizens are also aware of their illegal nature. Democratic satisfaction has also shown to increase citizens' likelihood to obey the law and comply with other governmental processes, such as pay taxes.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, citizens are considered more likely to engage in illegal civic acts if their confidence in the democratic system is very low.<sup>26</sup> Along the lines of these arguments, we expect that citizens who are very dissatisfied with the way democracy functions are more likely to accept both positive and negative forms of electoral strategies.

At the same time, we expect that voters who are highly skeptical about democracy's performance to be less responsive to programmatic policy messages. Democratic dissatisfaction has long been associated with the tendency to turn away from politics. Negative evaluations about democratic governance have been associated with the propensity not to turn out in elections and not to engage in political life.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, programmatic politics has a limited power to mobilize dissatisfied voters into accepting such practices. Following these arguments in the literature, we expect that citizens who are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy are:

H1a: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements

H1b: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on negative clientelistic inducements

H1c: Less likely to accept electoral strategies based on programmatic policy inducements

Local government bodies are responsible for many important day-to-day services provided to citizens. Many new democracies suffer from poor service delivery, which is the failure of the government to provide basic services for their citizens.<sup>28</sup> Access to essential services, such as welfare services, can be highly stratified in many countries and these situations have been particularly prone to clientelistic deals.<sup>29</sup>

Voters' perception on the workings of local politicians is likely to also affect their assessment of positive and negative forms of clientelism. Voters' confidence in the integrity of public officials influences their likelihood to commit illegal acts such as tax evasion.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, we could also expect that voters who are highly suspicious of the performance of the local politicians would be more likely to accept both positive and negative forms of electoral corruption. These arguments indicate that voters who are dissatisfied with the local government would prefer the particularistic benefits associated with clientelistic rewards. This preference comes at the expense of uncertain policy promises. They are skeptical regarding the ability of local politicians to deliver the programmatic promises once they get into office. These voters distrust local politicians, are critical towards them and less likely to accept their promises. We therefore hypothesize that voters who are dissatisfied with the performance of the local government are:

H2a: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements

H2b: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on negative clientelistic inducements

H2c: Less likely to accept electoral strategies based on programmatic policy inducements

### ***General and specific political knowledge***

Participation in modern political life requires extensive knowledge and information.<sup>31</sup> Voters' levels of political knowledge varies greatly and has an impact on their political

behaviour.<sup>32</sup> Low levels of political knowledge make voters more susceptible to populist and anti-establishment politicians.<sup>33</sup> We argue that citizens' level of political knowledge may also have an effect on their acceptance of different types of electoral exchanges. This happens due to the degree of cognitive complexity required to understand the mechanisms involved. Positive clientelism present voters with a simple electoral transaction: they receive goods in return of their vote. These offers would be especially attractive for low-knowledge voters who have little information about how the political system works. Voters' acceptance of clientelistic offers is also likely to be shaped by voters' understanding about the broader consequences of those transactions.<sup>34</sup> High-knowledge voters focus more on public consequences of politics whereas those with lower levels of political knowledge tend to be more myopic in their political judgements.<sup>35</sup> Providing particular clientelistic goods to a select group of voters often involves negative externalities for the rest of the voters such as steering resources away from public goods.<sup>36</sup> Voters judge clientelism more severely when they receive information about the negative externalities involved.<sup>37</sup>

When referring to negative clientelism, the immediate implications of voter coercion are explicit also to uninformed voters. However, political knowledge increases voters' sense of political competence and political efficacy.<sup>38</sup> Better informed voters are likely to be more aware of their democratic rights and to condemn voter coercion. Conversely, less knowledgeable voters could be expected to be less critical of this practice.

Voters' level of political knowledge is also likely to shape their acceptance of programmatic policy offers by politicians. Understanding programmatic politics requires information about how the political system works and political sophistication affects voters' judgements about the behaviour of politicians.<sup>39</sup> More knowledgeable voters are more sympathetic towards the efforts of politicians, while low-knowledge voters are more prone to expect politicians to act in bad faith.<sup>40</sup> Politically informed voters are inclined to accept programmatic political strategies. Conversely, politically ignorant voters may be more suspicious towards policy promises. We expect that voters with low levels of political knowledge to be:

H3a: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements

H3b: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on negative clientelistic inducements

H3c: Less likely to accept electoral strategies based on programmatic policy inducements

Voters with low levels of knowledge are less able to integrate new political information into an existing political framework.<sup>41</sup> During campaigns, political actors – parties and candidates – present different issues, set the policy agenda or denigrate their opponents.<sup>42</sup> A thorough understanding of these messages is usually achieved when voters have intimate knowledge about what political actors do and who they are. On the supply side, political parties with local leaders who have notoriety use clientelism more compared to parties with leaders who are not known to voters.<sup>43</sup> Following the same logic on the demand side, we expect that voters' specific knowledge such as the profile of party candidates to impact on how they respond to clientelistic electoral targeting. Voters who have little information about the track-records and policy profiles of different candidates would prefer the discretionary payoffs provided by positive clientelistic inducements and therefore accept such practices to a greater extent.

Positive and negative forms of clientelism do not differ markedly in terms of the cognitive capacity required to understand the proposed exchange. Yet, voters who



know the local candidates better are also more likely to be aware of various opportunities of political participation. They could be more critical towards voter intimidation. This is because knowing the local candidates gives these voters sufficient information and idea about how widespread such behaviour is among candidates. If they are aware that other candidates do not engage in such conduct, they would be less likely to find it acceptable and more likely to be motivated to punish it on the ballot box. Conversely, low-knowledge voters could condemn this practice to a less extent and accept it more. A reason for this is that their lack of knowledge does not give them a proper understanding on whether such behaviour is typical for the candidate or actually is part of the wider political culture of their place. More importantly, not knowing the candidate would make it harder for a voter to identify who is the person on whose behalf negative clientelism is conducted. It is thus challenging for the voters to punish at the polls such a behaviour.

The assessment of programmatic policy offers requires extensive information. Voters who are more knowledgeable about specific political candidates are likely to be more engaged in politics in general and should have a more positive outlook on the pursuits of the politicians.<sup>44</sup> Political actors seek to develop a consistent issue profile during electoral campaigns<sup>45</sup> that can be best achieved if voters pay attention to this profile. We expect that voters who exhibit specific knowledge about political parties to be more responsive to programmatic policy offers. Low-knowledge voters are more likely to be more suspicious of the campaign messages by politicians. In brief, we hypothesize that citizens who have low levels of knowledge of the top party candidates are:

H4a: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements

H4b: More likely to accept electoral strategies based on negative clientelistic inducements

H4c: Less likely to accept programmatic electoral strategies by politicians

## Research Design

To test these effects, we rely on an original vignette experiment conducted in the aftermath of the Bulgarian local elections (October–November 2019). Bulgaria is the appropriate setting for our study because clientelism plays a relevant and long-lasting role in local governance and elections (see the following section). Clientelism is part of a broader strategy of negative campaigning in which many Bulgarian political parties, although they use clientelism, accuse their opponents of doing that. Equally important, the country has several issues with the rule of law and the quality of democracy, which makes it a fertile soil for the proliferation of clientelism and citizens' broad dissatisfaction.

The vignette experiment uses a nationally representative sample of 1155 Bulgarian citizens and was fielded in two waves with a roughly equal number of respondents: December 2019–January 2020 and March–April 2020. We use a vignette to measure our dependent variables. All respondents were informed that they would see a description of a mayoral candidate running in the next Bulgarian local elections. The sample was divided in three sub-samples that were exposed to different incentives to vote provided by candidates for the mayoral elections. For positive clientelism we use the statements “The candidate gives you a bag of products, food or money to vote for them” and “The candidate offers preferential access to welfare benefits after the elections if you vote for them”.<sup>46</sup>



While we are aware that voters may be motivated differently by types of incentives (bag of products, food or money), we merged them in the same question to accurately reflect the Bulgarian context. The existing practices of clientelism, especially in smaller places, traditionally involve parties providing voters with packages that usually combine food, small items, and a small amount of money. These come together with a party flyer indicating which candidate the voter should support. In more recent times we observe that money is potentially handed over separately from bags of food and products, but the principle remains the same and Bulgarian voters can rarely differentiate whether they will receive an financial or material incentive to vote.

For negative clientelism the respondents see the statement “The candidate threatens you with the loss of access to welfare benefits if you do not vote for them”. For programmatic policies we used two statements referring to candidates’ promises to focus on policies that are very or moderately important to the voter.<sup>47</sup> After seeing one of these scenarios, the respondents were asked “How acceptable do you find this politician’s conduct?”. The answers were recorded on a 11-point ordinal scale that ranges between not at all (0) and very much (10). The results of the ANOVA test indicate the existence of a statistically significant difference (at the 0.01 level) between the means of acceptance for each of the three groups of respondents: positive clientelism, negative clientelism and programmatic policies.

The measurement of the independent and control variables is presented in Appendix 1. We briefly discuss here two variables that are less straightforward. First, we measure general knowledge (H3) through the subjective or perceived assessment of individual knowledge. This perception does not always correspond to the real or objective knowledge, being sometimes overestimated (Dunning-Kruger effect) or in other instances underestimated (impostor syndrome). However, the imbalance between actual and perceived knowledge is rarely large because the subjective knowledge can result from familiarity with a topic.<sup>48</sup> Second, media exposure is a cumulative index of frequency with which respondents watch, listen or read news on TV, radio, newspapers or online news portals (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.72). All “do not know / no answer” options were removed from the analysis. Appendix 3 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis.

We use OLS regression with robust standard errors. Our dependent variable is measured on a Likert scale with 11 values, and we should ideally use ordinal logistic regression. However, the assumption of proportional odds is violated – the Brant Test of Parallel Regression Assumption shows significance at the 0.01 level for all variables – and we could use only a generalized ordered logistic model. This is quite difficult to interpret and present and that is why we replace it with an OLS regression. The latter provides similar and allows for a more straightforward presentation and interpretation of results. The test for multi-collinearity shows that the independent variables are not highly correlated, i.e. the VIF values are lower than 1.24.

## Clientelism and local elections in Bulgaria: An Overview

Clientelism has a significant place in Bulgarian local politics. Following the introduction of local self-governance in 1998, the country is divided into 28 provinces (*oblasti*) and 265 municipalities (*obshtini*). While the provincial administration is appointed by the national government, every four years there are elections for municipal mayor and city council. The past three decades revealed the close relations between clientelism

and some of the main characteristics of Bulgarian local government. Three of them deserve particular attention. First, clientelism affects significantly the job policies of the local administration. Reports dating back to the first post-communist decade<sup>49</sup> highlight the regular practice of hiring “reliable” cadres in key positions in the local administration or municipal public services by the local governing party, as well as their protection once the local governing party is out of power. Such practices are important given the significance of local governments as an employer. In 12 of the 28 provinces the local government is among the top five employers,<sup>50</sup> suggesting that clientelism affects a significant portion of people in the communities across Bulgaria. Consistent with these observations, more recent studies provide evidence of both negative and positive types of clientelistic targeting in Bulgaria.<sup>51</sup>

Second, clientelism is reflected in local public procurement. The privatization of public services in post-communist Bulgaria allowed for the establishment of public-private partnerships, where a public service is assigned to a private provider. Reports on corruption in local public procurement show a close relationship between local businesses and the local party in government, where businesses would fund the electoral campaigns of political parties in exchange for procurement contracts for business owners affiliated to the party in local government.<sup>52</sup> Such practices became particularly widespread especially after the EU accession in 2007 that granted provinces and municipalities access to EU regional development funding.<sup>53</sup> For example, shortly before the 2019 European Parliament elections a journalist investigation revealed that EU funding, earmarked for rural tourism, has been used to build private villas for politicians from the governing center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB).<sup>54</sup> Generally, such clientelist practices remain well-known either for the low quality of the provided service or for the development of white elephant projects, such as the building of modern football stadiums in places with no football teams.<sup>55</sup>

Third, beyond clientelism in local government, local elections are another major arena for clientelistic practices. The most common of those is vote buying. Recent years suggest that it grows in scope and relevance at local elections. For example, a recent survey showed that almost a third of respondents knew personally about cases of vote buying.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, vote-buying is intensive among groups with an ethnic minority background (the Roma, in particular) and/or of lower economic status.<sup>57</sup> These practices can influence the electoral outcome. For example, a survey by Gallup International for the 2015 local elections showed that in places with a close race for the mayoral position, there has been a significant rise in turnout among Roma voters.<sup>58</sup>

The 2019 local elections were particularly illustrative for clientelist practices. Held just a few months after the elections for the European Parliament, also marked by rampant levels of vote-buying especially in rural and/or impoverished areas of Bulgaria,<sup>59</sup> the local elections saw the extension of the competition between GERB and its main political opponents on the left and right. In 2015, GERB won the mayor office in almost every major city.<sup>60</sup> In 2019, the party had to defend its gains and overall local government record. The campaign in the major cities was heated, with the liberal right opposition highlighting several clientelistic practices, demanding for a more transparent and accountable local government. For example, in a television debate, the main liberal right candidate for Sofia mayor Borislav Ignatov highlighted “corruption in all its forms” as the main issue of the city, citing examples from

minor corruption in the municipal administration to major irregularities of public procurement procedures.<sup>61</sup> The main opposition party, the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), aimed to use the local elections to criticize GERB's governing style, arguing that these clientelistic practices in local government are the essence of GERB's governance, calling to vote them out of power.

Dissatisfaction and Poor Knowledge

Figure 1 presents the distribution of acceptance for positive and negative clientelism, and programmatic policies among the Bulgarian electorate. The horizontal axis displays the degree of acceptance. There are three straightforward conclusions. First, programmatic policies are accepted to a considerably higher level than any form of clientelism. The modal value for acceptance of programmatic activities is the middle of the scale, with the majority of opinions to the right side of the modal category. Overall, many voters find programmatic policies quite acceptable. This indicates that while clientelism is strongly rooted in Bulgarian local politics, voters are not particularly fond of these practices. It shows that clientelism is not necessarily a part of the Bulgarian political culture.

Second, Bulgarians accept more the positive than the negative version of clientelism. There is a very strong opposition – three out of five voters – to coercion practices used to persuade citizens to cast their vote. In comparison, only one in three Bulgarians considers completely unacceptable the offering of money, food or welfare benefits in exchange for votes. These results confirm that clientelism can be accepted if it provides (positive) personal benefits to the respondent. As seen in the background information about the case, the most common clientelistic practices in Bulgarian local politics rely to a certain degree on reciprocal benefits, thus creating the impression of being a fair exchange between equal parties.

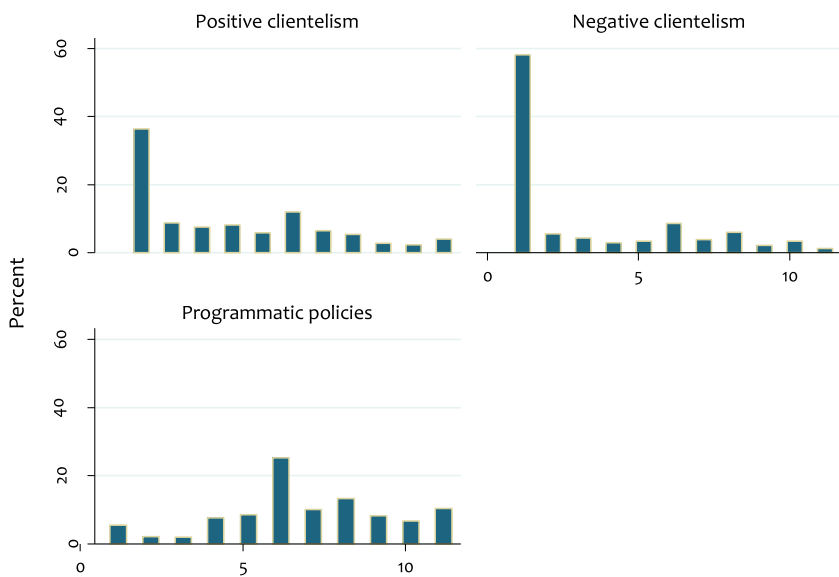
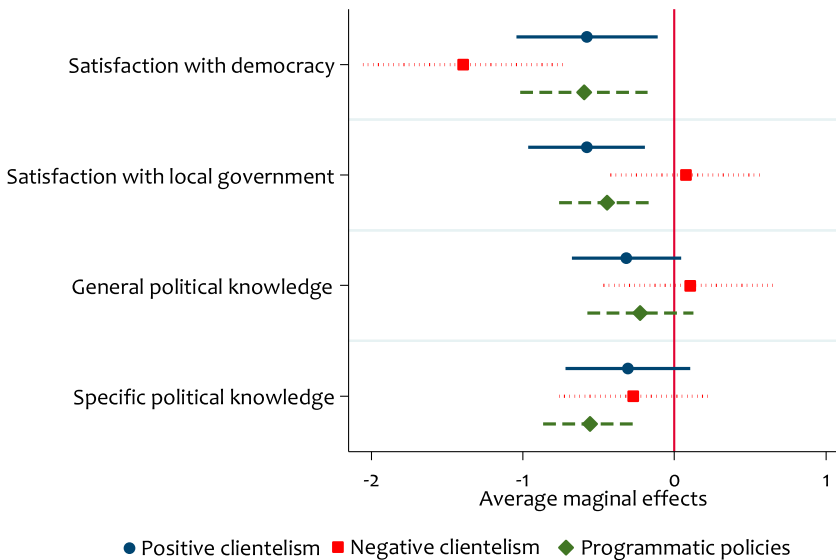


Figure 1. The acceptance of clientelism and programmatic policies among Bulgarians.

We run two different models for each form of clientelism and programmatic policies. The results of the model without controls are shown in [Figure 2](#). There is empirical support for some of the hypothesized effects, but the reality appears to be considerably more nuanced than what expected in theory. The marginal effects indicate that dissatisfaction with democracy is a strong predictor for the acceptance of electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements. This is in line with the theoretical expectations and evidence indicates that dissatisfaction with democracy favours also the acceptance of negative clientelism and programmatic policies. In fact, the effect on voter coercion is the strongest among the four main effects. One possible explanation for this is apathy. Clientelism in Bulgarian local politics goes back at least two decades. The absence of a decisive policy addressing it seems to have taken root among Bulgarian voters into accepting even vote coercion as a common practice.

Dissatisfaction with the way in which democracy works in Bulgaria increases the acceptance of programmatic policies. One possible explanation is related to the desire to improve the quality of democracy in the country. While Bulgarian voters may be apathetic by accepting even vote coercion as a standard electoral practice, this does not mean that they remain passive. This data seems to confirm that as Bulgarian voters are indeed interested in alternatives that ensure better accountability of local government. For example, in the 2019 local elections in the capital city of Sofia, Boris Bonev got 11% of the votes based on a comprehensive programme that builds upon the policy proposals and local government watchdog work of Save Sofia, an NGO that he chairs.

We also find empirical support for the theoretical expectation according to which Bulgarian voters who are dissatisfied with the way in which the local government



**Figure 2.** The effects of satisfaction and knowledge on acceptance.

Note: The regression coefficients are available in Appendix 2.

does its job are more likely to accept positive clientelism. This is the strongest predictor for the acceptance of positive clientelism including the controls (Model 2 in Appendix 2). Contrary to our expectations, we find a similar effect on the acceptance of programmatic policies. This happens because Bulgarian voters remain open towards candidates who promise to improve their local community by providing a clear plan for local governance and ensure an improved accountability. For example, during the campaign for the 2019 local elections almost two thirds of the voters indicated that even if they are disillusioned with the incumbent mayor, they would vote based on their preferences and values rather than automatically supporting any of the challengers.<sup>62</sup>

The evidence shows no effect of the dissatisfaction with how the local government works on negative clientelism. One explanation for the statistical independence is that to Bulgarian voters negative clientelism remains a widespread practice that any party with realistic chance of gaining or keeping power in local government would use. Under such circumstances, Bulgarian voters take the rather rational view that the government performance depends on factors other than the reasons people were hired or fired in the local administration.

Figure 3 compares and contrasts the effects of the two forms of satisfaction – with democracy and with the government – on the three types of inducements. Although these two forms of satisfaction are not highly correlated, their effect on the acceptance of positive clientelism and programmatic policies is very similar. The main difference lies in the fact that for programmatic policies the effect takes place at a higher level of acceptance. The figure confirms the earlier interpretation according to which the acceptance of negative clientelism is driven only by one form of satisfaction, i.e. with democracy.

Returning to the marginal effects presented in Figure 2, the evidence confirms our theoretical expectation according to which respondents with low levels of knowledge

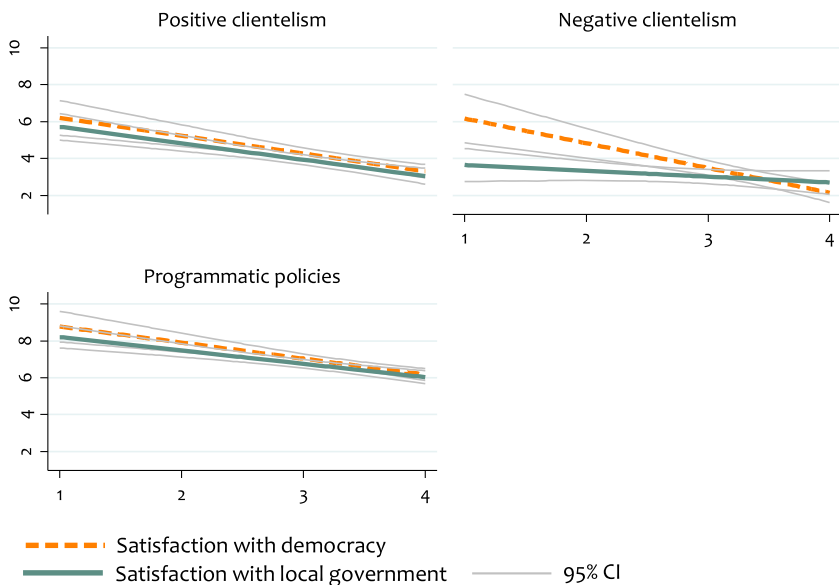


Figure 3. The effects of the two forms of satisfaction on acceptance.

about local politics are likely to accept electoral strategies based on positive clientelistic inducements. In the Bulgarian case, this matches the reality given the deteriorating state of the local media. Several reports reveal that Bulgarian regional and local media increasingly rely on local government funding through PR contracts as a substitute for independent funding.<sup>63</sup> They fail to serve their public functions of scrutinizing the local government under the threat of losing their funding, prompting them to avoid reporting on such clientelist practices. This prevents Bulgarian voters from gaining a proper understanding on the direct effects of clientelism in their local community.

The findings also illustrate that respondents with low levels of political knowledge are also inclined to easier accept programmatic policies. In Bulgaria, this is because of the weak communication skills of independent experts. Recent years saw the increasing scrutiny of the local candidates' political programmes, but such discussions remained rather technical and incomprehensible for the wider public. In such circumstances, people with limited political knowledge are unable to properly assess the candidates' proposed programme, prompting them to be more open towards any candidate that tries to draw support on a programmatic basis if not through any other means.

Equally important, our results indicate that Bulgarian voters who possess knowledge about local politics are more inclined to accept negative clientelism. One possible explanation for this is their awareness and acceptance that such practice is used in the local governance of their own community, given its widespread character in Bulgarian local politics. This prompts such voters to perceive negative clientelism as a legitimate approach towards mobilizing support.

The specific knowledge of top candidates in Bulgarian elections produces the same effects on the acceptance for clientelism and programmatic policies. Citizens who have limited knowledge are more likely to accept positive inducements, as hypothesized (H2b). A similar effect in terms of size and direction is observed in relation to coercive clientelism. For acceptance of programmatic policies, the effect is even stronger: the less people know about candidates, the more likely they are to accept such policies. These results confirm the ambiguous state in which many Bulgarian voters find themselves. Without knowing the candidate, voters tend to return to their own perceptions on what constitutes a legitimate electoral practice, thus being particularly open towards programmatic offers, but also towards clientelist practices, given how widespread they are in Bulgarian local politics.

Among the controls, income is the variable with the highest explanatory power. The findings indicate that poorer people are more likely to accept both forms of clientelism and richer Bulgarians are more inclined to accept the programmatic policies. This confirms earlier findings in the literature<sup>64</sup> and recent journalistic reports on clientelistic practices in Bulgaria. These reports show a combination of a political apathy and pragmatism among poorer voters. The latter have the perception that their vote would not improve their lives so they are willing to engage in clientelistic practices as a means of personal benefit and/or perseverance.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, wealthier voters are not particularly fond of clientelism, preferring to support a programme that aligns with their own interests and views about the development of their community.

People who do not use media on a regular basis are more inclined to accept both clientelism and programmatic policies, with a stronger effect on the latter, which seems to confirm the effects of the deteriorating state of regional and local media in Bulgaria and its limited abilities to scrutinize local governments. Gender is a strong

predictor for negative clientelism with men accepting it to a much higher extent than women. One potential reason for this is the rather conservative and patriarchal nature of Bulgarian society,<sup>66</sup> in which vote coercion is seen as a legitimate way to exhort authority. For similar reasons, education does not appear to play a role in the acceptance of these electoral practices.

## Conclusions

An emerging line of research has begun to focus on the demand side of electoral clientelism. This article contributes to this literature by explaining the acceptance of electoral clientelism and programmatic policy offers. To our knowledge, it is the first study exploring the role of democratic satisfaction and political knowledge in shaping the acceptance of different types of electoral inducements. We examine this with the help of a vignette experiment embedded in a survey conducted in Bulgaria after the 2019 local elections. Our results show that voters who are not satisfied with the way democracy and democratic institutions function in Bulgaria are more likely to accept positive clientelistic electoral offers. Voters who have little general political knowledge are also more likely to accept positive clientelistic targeting. Our findings regarding the acceptance of voter coercion are more mixed and less robust. In contrast to our expectations, democratically satisfied voters and high-knowledge voters are also more likely to accept programmatic policy offers.

Our results on the acceptance of positive types of clientelism shed light on one of the central puzzles of clientelism research. We can better understand why clientelism is still widely used despite the known commitment problems undermining its efficacy.<sup>67</sup> We illustrate that the cognitive heterogeneity between the voters may explain the effectiveness of electoral clientelism even when it is not monitored. Clientelistic offers resonate with voters who are very dissatisfied with democratic performance and who possess little knowledge on politics. All these indicate that some voters may be so disappointed with “traditional politics” that they are willing to vote for clientelistic politicians hoping to get something in return for their vote. Clientelistic exchanges could thus in some cases function as a means of “protest voting” for highly dissatisfied citizens.

We highlight how general levels of democratic dissatisfaction and political knowledge may contribute to the formation of attitudes that partially undermine the logic of representation. This has important policy implications especially in new democracies where the politics of representation is often problematic. When voters accept the informal motivations provided by the electoral competition, the political competition and representation in general is biased. Dissatisfied citizens accepting the use of clientelism may encourage political parties and politicians to invest resources in such practices rather than performing well in office or promoting policies.

Although limited to one country, our analysis provides several relevant insights about the public acceptance of clientelism. Further research can build on these grounds and can, for example, analyse the extent to which the acceptance of clientelism is translated into votes for parties using such practices. Attitudes and voting behaviour are sometimes correlated, and it is important to see whether this also happens in the presence of clientelism. Another avenue for research could distinguish clientelist actions between incumbent and challenger politicians, or by looking closely into the citizens’ working environment (public vs private), prior experiences of clientelism,



or personal knowledge about clientelistic practices. On a broader level, we may need to investigate the relation between political apathy and passivity. Existing literature tends to view the two as similar, but the evidence in this article clearly shows that being apathetic and cynical about politics does not necessarily mean that one is passive and does not seek to reignite their political participation. More work needs to be done also on the relation between non-participation and the values and views that underpin it.

## Notes

1. Kitschelt and Wilkinson, *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*.
2. Piattoni, *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation*; Stokes et al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*; Nichter, *Votes for Survival*; Yıldırım and Kitschelt, "Analytical Perspectives on Varieties of Clientelism".
3. Pellicer et al., "The Demand Side of Clientelism"; Auyero, "From the Client's Point(s) of View"; Auerbach and Thachil, "How Clients Select Brokers"; Nichter and Peress, "Request Fulfilling".
4. Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto, "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis".
5. Foa et al., *The Global Satisfaction*.
6. Pellicer et al., "The Demand Side of Clientelism"; Nichter and Peress, "Request Fulfilling"; Auerbach and Thachil, "How Clients Select Brokers".
7. Weitz-Shapiro, *Curbing Clientelism in Argentina*; González-Ocantos, de Jonge, and Nickerson, "The Conditionality of Vote-Buying Norms"; Mares and Young, *Conditionality and Coercion*.
8. Mares and Young, "Buying, Expropriating, and Stealing Votes"; Mares and Young, *Conditionality and Coercion*; Mares and Visconti, "Voting for the Lesser Evil".
9. Kitschelt, "Party Systems".
10. Kitschelt and Wilkinson, *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*.
11. Mares and Young, *Conditionality and Coercion*; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., "Carrots and Sticks".
12. Stokes et al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*.
13. Ibid.
14. Aldrich, "Rational Choice and Turnout".
15. Gherghina and Volintiru, "Political Parties and Clientelism".
16. Mares and Young, *Conditionality and Coercion*.
17. Stokes et al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*.
18. Mares and Young, "Buying, Expropriating, and Stealing Votes".
19. Ibid.
20. Milner, *Managing Information and Knowledge*.
21. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*; Klingemann and Fuchs, *Citizens and the State*; Dalton, *Citizen Politics*.
22. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*; Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
23. Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
24. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
25. Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
26. Ibid.
27. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*; Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
28. Thachil, "How Does Poor Service," 13.
29. Auerbach and Thachil, "How Clients Select Brokers".
30. Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
31. Milner, *Managing Information*.
32. Smets and van Ham, "The Embarrassment of Riches?".
33. Milner, "Populism and Political Knowledge".
34. González-Ocantos, de Jonge, and Nickerson, "The Conditionality of Vote-Buying Norms".
35. Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know*.
36. Gherghina and Volintiru, "Political Parties and Clientelism".
37. Erlich, "Can Information Campaigns".
38. McAllister, "Civic Education".
39. Galston, "Political Knowledge".

40. Popkin and Dimock, "Political Knowledge".
41. Ibid.
42. Arceneaux and Nickerson, "Comparing Negative and Positive"; Haselmayer, Meyer, and Wagner, "Fighting for Attention".
43. Gherghina and Volintiru, "Political Parties and Clientelism".
44. Popkin and Dimock, "Political Knowledge".
45. Baumann, Debus, and Gross, "Strategic Issue Emphasis".
46. We tested the effects of separate incentives for voters in relation to both positive clientelism and programmatic policies. These were provided at random to the respondents within the same survey. The results reveal highly similar results and that is why we merged them (e.g. vote buying and welfare benefits are merged into positive clientelism).
47. There were specific policies selected according to the real-life problems of localities in Bulgaria, e.g. local roads, schools, healthcare.
48. Park, "News Media Exposure".
49. Damyanova, *Coalition 2000*.
50. Dimitrova, "Noviyat Nay-Golyam".
51. Mares, Muntean, and Petrova, "Pressure, Favours, and Vote-Buying"; Mares, Muntean, and Petrova, "Economic Intimidation".
52. CSD, *State Capture Unplugged*.
53. CSD, "Upravlenie Na Obshtestvenite".
54. Vateva and Stanev, "Kashta Za Skandali".
55. Georgiev, Spasov, and Filipov, "Sportat Za Edno".
56. Gallup International, "Izborite – Po-Skoro Chestni".
57. Gallup International, "Nad 600 Hilyadi Priznavat".
58. Gallup International, "Elektoralni Profili".
59. Filipova, Markaryan, and Yonchev, "Edno Kafe i 50 Leva Resto".
60. Yordanova, "GERB Se Pohvali s 1727 Obshtinski".
61. Wisozinski, "Debatat Za Sofia".
62. Alpha Research, "Obshtestveni Naglasi v Nachaloto".
63. CSD, "Regional Media in Bulgaria".
64. Weitz-Shapiro, "What Wins Votes"; Mares and Visconti, "Voting for the Lesser Evil".
65. Filipova, Markaryan, and Yonchev, "Edno Kafe i 50 Leva Resto".
66. Schüler, "Zur Politischen Kultur".
67. Stokes et al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*; Hicken and Nathan, "Clientelism's Red Herrings".

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland (Grant 316897).

## Notes on contributors

**Sergiu Gherghina** is an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics, legislative and voting behavior, democratization, and the use of direct democracy.

**Inga Saikkonen** is an Academy of Finland Research Fellow in the Social Science Research Institute at Åbo Akademi University. She holds a D.Phil. in Politics from the University of Oxford. Her research interests include electoral clientelism, democratization and electoral authoritarian regimes.

**Petar Bankov** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Glasgow. His research interests are in comparative party politics, particularly in the local dynamics between party organisations and local

communities. His previous work studied the electoral geography of the European radical left since 1990.

## ORCID

Sergiu Gherghina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-5598>

Inga Saikkonen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2303-0328>

Petar Bankov  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0609-4947>

## Bibliography

- Aldrich, John H. "Rational Choice and Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 1 (1993): 246–278.
- Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1963.
- Alpha Research. "Obshtestveni Naglasi v Nachaloto Na Noviia Politicheski Sezon - Stari Problemi, Novi Igrachi i Vazmozhni Intrigi v Mestnia Vot [Public Attitudes at the Start of the New Political Season – Old Problems, New Players and Possible Challenges for the Local Ele]." 2019.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, and David W. Nickerson. "Comparing Negative and Positive Campaign Messages: Evidence from Two Field Experiments." *American Politics Research* 38, no. 1 (2010): 54–83.
- Auerbach, Adam Michael, and Tariq Thachil. "How Clients Select Brokers: Competition and Choice in India's Slums." *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 4 (2018): 775–791.
- Auyero, Javier. "From the Client's Point(s) of View': How Poor People Perceive and Evaluate Political Clientelism." *Theory and Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 297–334.
- Baumann, Markus, Marc Debus, and Martin Gross. "Strategic Issue Emphasis in Parties' Election Campaign Statements." *Party Politics* 27, no. 3 (2021): 515–527.
- CSD. *Regional Media in Bulgaria: The Limits of Survival*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2015.
- CSD. *State Capture Unplugged: Countering Administrative and Political Corruption in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2016.
- CSD. *Upravljenie Na Obshtestvenite Porachki v Bulgaria: Korupsionni Riskove i Nakazatelno Presledvane* [Management of Public Procurement in Bulgaria: Corruption Practices and Criminal Prosecution]. Sofia, 2016.
- Dalton, Russell J. *Citizen Politics. Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2013.
- Damyanova, Zhivka, ed. *Coalition 2000: Local Anti-Corruption Initiatives*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 1999.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matter*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Dimitrova, Vanya. "Noviyat Nay-Golyam Rabotodatel [The New Biggest Employer]." *Capital*, 2015. [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/23/2595017\\_noviiat\\_nai-goliam\\_rabotodatel/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/23/2595017_noviiat_nai-goliam_rabotodatel/)
- Easton, David. *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley, 1965.
- Erlach, Aaron. "Can Information Campaigns Impact Preferences Toward Vote Selling? Theory and Evidence from Kenya." *International Political Science Review* 41, no. 3 (2020): 419–435.
- Filipova, Asya, Aleksandra Markaryan, and Vladimir Yonchev. "Edno Kafe i 50 Leva Resto, Ili Kak Prekrasniyat Severozapad Prodade Glasa Si [A Coffee and 50 Leva in Return, or How the Wonderful North-West Sold Its Vote]." *OffNews*, 2019. <https://offnews.bg/razsledvane/edno-kafe-i-50-leva-resto-ili-kak-prekrasniyat-severozapad-prodade-gla-704603.html>
- Foa, R.S., A. Klassen, M. Slade, A. Rand, and R. Collins. *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*. Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020.
- Gallup International. *Elektoralni Profili – Mestni Izbori 2015* [Electoral Profiles - Local Elections 2015]. Sofia, 2015.
- Gallup International. *Izborite – Po-Skoro Chestni, No v Sofia Ima Poveche Kolebanie. Po-Malko Naseleni Mesta – Po-Zavisim Vot* [The Elections - Rather Fair, but More Doubt in Sofia. In Smaller Cities - More Dependent Vote]. Sofia, 2019.

- Gallup International. *Nad 600 Hilyadi Priznavat, Che Biha Glasuvali Sreshtu Stimul Ili Po Prinuda* [More than 600,000 Admit to Be Open to Vote in Expense of a Stimulus or by Coercion]. Sofia, 2019.
- Galston, William A. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 217–234.
- Georgiev, Ognyan, Spas Spasov, and Georgi Filipov. "Sportat Za Edno Po-Mirno Selo [Sport for a Peaceful Village]." *Capital*, 2015. [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ekonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/28/2599378\\_sportut\\_za\\_edno\\_po-mirno\\_selo/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ekonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/28/2599378_sportut_za_edno_po-mirno_selo/)
- Gherghina, Sergiu, and Clara Volintiru. "Political Parties and Clientelism in Transition Countries: Evidence from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine." *Acta Politica*, no. online first (2020): 1–17.
- Gonzalez-Ocantos, Ezequiel, Chad Kiewiet de Jonge, Carlos Meléndez, David Nickerson, and Javier Osorio. "Carrots and Sticks: Experimental Evidence of Vote-Buying and Voter Intimidation in Guatemala." *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 1 (2020): 46–61.
- González-Ocantos, Ezequiel, Chad Kiewiet de Jonge, and David W. Nickerson. "The Conditionality of Vote-Buying Norms: Experimental Evidence from Latin America." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (2014): 197–211.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel J. Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.
- Haselmayer, Martin, Thomas M Meyer, and Markus Wagner. "Fighting for Attention: Media Coverage of Negative Campaign Messages." *Party Politics* 25, no. 3 (2019): 412–423.
- Hicken, Allen, and Noah L. Nathan. "Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 277–294.
- Kitschelt, Herbert. "Party Systems." In *Handbook of Comparative Politics*, edited by Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes, 522–554. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Kitschelt, Herbert, and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds. *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Klingemann, Hans-Dieter, and Dieter Fuchs, eds. *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Mares, Isabela, Aurelian Muntean, and Tsveta Petrova. "Economic Intimidation in Contemporary Elections: Evidence from Romania and Bulgaria." *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 3 (2018): 486–517.
- Mares, Isabela, Aurelian Muntean, and Tsveta Petrova. "Pressure, Favours, and Vote-Buying: Experimental Evidence from Romania and Bulgaria." *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 6 (2017): 940–960.
- Mares, Isabela, and Giancarlo Visconti. "Voting for the Lesser Evil: Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment in Romania." *Political Science Research and Methods* 8, no. 2 (2020): 315–328.
- Mares, Isabela, and Lauren Young. "Buying, Expropriating, and Stealing Votes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (May 2016): 267–288.
- Mares, Isabela, and Lauren E. Young. *Conditionality and Coercion: Electoral Clientelism in Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- McAllister, Ian. "Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (1998): 7–23.
- Milner, Eileen. *Managing Information and Knowledge in the Public Sector*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Milner, Henry. "Populism and Political Knowledge: The United States in Comparative Perspective." *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 1 (2020): 226–238.
- Nichter, Simeon. *Votes for Survival: Relational Clientelism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Nichter, Simeon, and Michael Peress. "Request Fulfilling: When Citizens Demand Clientelist Benefits." *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 8 (2017): 1086–1117.
- Norris, Pippa. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Park, Cheong-Yi. "News Media Exposure and Self-Perceived Knowledge: The Illusion of Knowing." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13, no. 4 (2001): 419–425.
- Pellicer, Miquel, Eva Wegner, Lindsay Benstead, Harold Kincaid, Ellen Lust, and Juanita Vasquez. "The Demand Side of Clientelism: The Role of Client's Perceptions and Values." SALDRU Working Paper. Cape Town, 2014.

- Piattoni, Simona, ed. *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Popkin, Samuel L., and Michael A. Dimock. "Political Knowledge and Citizen Competence." In *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*, edited by Stephen Elkin and Karol Soltan, 117–146. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.
- Schüler, Sonja. "Zur Politischen Kultur Im Heutigen Bulgarien." *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 2 (2008): 82–98.
- Smets, Kaat, and Carolien van Ham. "The Embarrassment of Riches? A Meta-Analysis of Individual-Level Research on Voter Turnout." *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 3 (2013): 344–359.
- Stokes, Susan C., Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco. *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Thachil, Tariq. "How Does Poor Service Delivery Shape Politics in Clientelist Settings?" *APSA Annals of Comparative Democratization* 17, no. 3 (2019): 13–16.
- Vateva, Denitsa, and Ilin Stanev. "Kashta Za Skandali [A Scandal House]." *Capital*, 2019. [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2019/05/09/3536749\\_kushta\\_za\\_skandali/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2019/05/09/3536749_kushta_za_skandali/)
- Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca. *Curbing Clientelism in Argentina: Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca. "What Wins Votes: Why Some Politicians Opt Out of Clientelism." *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2012): 568–583.
- Wisozinski, Juliusz. "Debatat Za Sofia: Nay-Interesnoto Ot Izkazvaniyata Na Manolova, Fandakova, Ignatov i Dzhambazki [The Debate about Sofia: The Most Relevant from the Statements of Manolova, Fandakova, Ignatov and Dzhambazki]." *OffNews*, 2019. <https://offnews.bg/politika/debatat-za-sofia-naj-interesnoto-ot-izkazvaniyata-na-manolova-fandakova-713260.html>
- Yıldırım, Kerem, and Herbert Kitschelt. "Analytical Perspectives on Varieties of Clientelism." *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 20–43.
- Yordanova, Lyuba. "GERB Se Pohvali s 127 Obshtinski Savetnitsi i 129 Kmetove [GERB Boasted 127 Counsellors and 129 Mayors]." *Capital*, 2015. [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/mestni\\_izbori2015/2015/11/01/2640836\\_gerb\\_se\\_pohvali\\_s\\_127\\_obshtinski\\_suvetnici\\_i\\_129/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/mestni_izbori2015/2015/11/01/2640836_gerb_se_pohvali_s_127_obshtinski_suvetnici_i_129/)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Variable measurement codebook

Variable	Question	Coding
Positive clientelism / negative clientelism / programmatic policies	How acceptable do you find this politician's conduct? If he/she gives you a bag of products, food or money; offers preferential access to welfare benefits after the elections to vote for them; threatens you with the loss of access to welfare benefits if you do not vote for them; the candidate will improve the state of the local roads; the candidate will improve the state of the local schools and health care	Not at all (0) Very much (10)
Satisfaction with democracy	How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Bulgaria?	Not at all satisfied (1) Very satisfied (4)
Satisfaction with local government	How satisfied are you with the way the local government (of your community) does its job?	
General knowledge	How would you rate your knowledge about what happens now in the politics of your local community?	Very limited (1) Very good (4)
Specific knowledge	How well did you know the top candidates of these parties from your locality before the electoral campaign for the local elections?	Not at all (1) Very well (4)

(Continued)

Continued.

Variable	Question	Coding
Media exposure	How often watch, listen or read news on TV, radio, newspapers or online news portals	Seldom / Never (1), daily or almost daily (4)
Gender	What is your gender?	male (1), female (2)
Education	What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?	Elementary school (1), postgraduate studies (5)
Income	What is the total yearly net income in your household?	0-4,000 JLB (roughly €2000) (1), over 100,000 JLB (7)

**Appendix 2. The results of the OLS regression analysis**

	Positive clientelism		Negative clientelism		Programmatic policies	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.13** (0.24)	-0.14** (0.24)	-0.32** (0.34)	-0.30** (0.33)	-0.16** (0.21)	-0.15** (0.21)
Satisfaction with local government	-0.15** (0.19)	-0.15** (0.19)	-0.02 (0.25)	-0.03 (0.26)	-0.15** (0.16)	-0.15** (0.16)
General political knowledge	-0.08* (0.18)	-0.08* (0.18)	0.03 (0.29)	0.01 (0.27)	-0.07 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.18)
Specific political knowledge	-0.08 (0.21)	-0.07 (0.20)	-0.07 (0.25)	-0.01 (0.25)	-0.16** (0.16)	-0.16** (0.16)
Media exposure		-0.04 (0.05)		-0.07 (0.08)		-0.09* (0.05)
Gender		-0.04 (0.28)		-0.23** (0.39)		0.04 (0.24)
Education		-0.04 (0.11)		-0.04 (0.17)		0.01 (0.11)
Income		-0.14** (0.09)		-0.12* (0.10)		0.08* (0.07)
Constant	9.23 (0.92)	11.01 (1.17)	7.97 (1.28)	11.64 (1.51)	12.19 (0.79)	11.83 (1.12)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.17	0.12	0.13
N	464	464	232	232	458	458

Note: Coefficients are standardized (robust standard errors in brackets).

\*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05.

**Appendix 3. Descriptive statistics of the variables included in the analysis**

	Mean	Std. dev	Min.	Max.	N
Acceptance positive clientelism	3.93 (4.10)	3.04 (3.15)	1	11	464
Acceptance negative clientelism	3.07 (3.18)	2.96 (3.12)	1	11	232
Acceptance programmatic politics	6.75 (6.89)	2.61 (2.62)	1	11	458
Satisfaction with democracy	3.34 (3.43)	0.69 (0.68)	1	4	1155
Satisfaction with local government	2.97 (2.96)	0.84 (0.86)	1	4	1155
General political knowledge	2.37 (2.38)	0.79 (0.78)	1	4	1155
Specific political knowledge	2.81 (2.71)	0.76 (0.76)	1	4	1155
Media exposure	8.19 (8.28)	2.57 (2.65)	4	16	1155
Gender	1.60 (1.53)	0.49 (0.500)	1	2	1155
Education	3.44 (3.34)	1.16 (1.12)	1	5	1155
Income	2.95 (2.97)	1.67 (1.63)	1	7	1155

Notes: The survey was conducted in two waves: December 2019–February 2020 ( $N = 543$ ) and March–April 2020 ( $N = 612$ ).

The mean and standard deviation are for the entire sample, in brackets for Wave 1.