

Review essay

Democrats and Autocrats: Pathways of Subnational Undemocratic Regime Continuity within Democratic Countries

**By Augustina Giraudy, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 214pp, \$ 84.95
hardcover**

Curbing Clientelism in Argentina: Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy

**By Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 195pp, \$ 90.00
hardcover**

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Research on subnational authoritarianism in democratic countries has gained momentum over the past decade. Most existing studies aim at explaining why and how local strongmen managed to survive in some but not other subnational jurisdictions despite a democratization of politics at the national level. Focusing on subnational variance in democratization as well as trying to understand regime continuity, existing studies rarely consider the possibility that subnational authoritarian regimes may continue to exist for different reasons. Available research also does not say much about what causes may lead to the breakdown of subnational authoritarian regimes. Two new books address these gaps in the current literature on subnational authoritarianism.

In *Democrats and Autocrats: Pathways of Subnational Undemocratic Regime Continuity within Democratic Countries*, Augustina Giraudy examines the conditions that allow for the continuity of Subnational Undemocratic Regimes (SURs), which are subnational political entities in which incumbents prevent opposition candidates from gaining access to state positions through undemocratic and informal actions, including electoral fraud and voter intimidation, the restriction of civil and political rights and frequent changes in the local electoral and institutional framework. Giraudy argues that there are several ways in which SURs may continue after countries adopt democratic institutions at the national level. The interaction between national and local executive governments provides the key to understanding this variance in SURs continuity. Concretely, in democracies in which presidents can wield effective power over (co-partisan or opposition) subnational autocrats and have enough leverage to force the latter to cooperate, presidents have incentives to strengthen and sustain SURs as such local autocrats are useful allies in elections. This power constellation results in *SURs reproduction from above*.

In contrast, there are subnational autocrats whom national presidents cannot co-opt because they lack the powers to do so. Presidents have an incentive to undermine such potentially unruly SURs. However, if such local autocrats have the capacity to maintain local party elite unity and are supported by the local masses, *SURs self-reproduction* follows as these autocrats successfully fend off presidential attacks from above. If presidential powers to coopt SURs are ineffective *and* local autocrats are incapable of putting together a solid local coalition, SURs usually become democratic jurisdictions, Giraudy argues.

Understanding the interaction between national and local players is therefore key in isolating the conditions for SURs survival. To this end, Giraudy examines the powers of presidents to coopt local autocrats as well as the power of local autocrats to maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis presidents.

A combination of fiscal and institutional powers determines the authority of presidents over local autocrats. A president's *fiscal powers* are high if intergovernmental transfers occur at the discretion of the national executive government. A president's fiscal powers are low if transfers between government layers occur automatically and are based on pre-defined formulas. Furthermore, presidents yield high fiscal powers if they can easily change the rules for the allocation of fiscal resources. Finally, if national tax revenues from which subnational political units are excluded are large, the president gains additional fiscal power.

A president enjoys commands over strong *partisan powers* if the party to which the president belongs is highly institutionalized, enjoys high party discipline due to established rules and regulations and has a presence in every subnational jurisdiction. Under such conditions, co-partisans ruling over undemocratic jurisdictions can be coopted through the party apparatus while local autocrats affiliated with opposition parties can be threatened through the potential mobilization of subnational party branches belonging to the president's party.

However, to fully understand the authority of presidents, the capacity of subnational autocrats to fend off attacks also needs to be taken into account. Again, a combination of fiscal and institutional powers determine subnational autocrats' autonomy vis-à-vis the center. With regard to *fiscal conditions*, the size of local fiscal deficits, levels of indebtedness and the possibility to raise taxes at the subnational level define the fiscal autonomy of local autocrats. If local fiscal deficits and indebtedness are high while possibilities to collect local revenues are scarce, local autocrats have only weak fiscal powers to resist cooptation from above. *Institutional conditions* that determine the degree to which presidents can co-opt SURs fall into two broad categories, namely patrimonial and non-patrimonial state structures. Patrimonial state structures exist if the local institutional framework centralizes power in the hands of the local ruler, blurs the distinction between public and private interests, generates dependencies that can be exploited for political gain and facilitate the use of public resources for private gain. Non-patrimonial local state structures, in contrast, limit the power of incumbents, protect the autonomy of societal groups when interacting with the state and establish clear rules to distinguish public and private goods. Such institutional differences are important as they determine the capacity of local autocrats to defend themselves against outside attacks. Patrimonial structures increase the propensity of local autocrats to neutralize presidential attacks, while non-patrimonial structures make it difficult for local autocrats to control the boundaries to their jurisdictions and neutralize cooptation attempts from above. In short, "a combination of national and subnational variables need to be present in order for presidents to wield effective power over SURs/ autocrats," so Giraudy (p. 26).

This combination of national and subnational variables results in subnational autocrats whom presidents can easily coopt and others who are relatively more autonomous. Local autocrats who enjoy comparatively high levels of autonomy vis-à-vis national presidents pose a

potential threat to national leaders who therefore seek to oust them from power. However, unruly local autocrats who manage to impose party discipline and elicit the support of the masses will survive national efforts to undermine their rule.

To test her theory, Giraudy examines SURs continuity in Argentina and Mexico and finds that the combination of fiscal and institutional conditions at the national and subnational level has led to SURs reproduction from above as well as SURs self-reproduction in both countries. However, Argentinian presidents enjoy greater fiscal powers than their Mexican counterparts, while the Peronist Partido Justicialista in Argentina is weakly institutionalized and party discipline is low. Mexico differs from Argentina as the Partido Acción Nacional presidential party in power during the period examined in the book under review here was comparatively more institutionalized. Therefore, fiscal conditions at the national and local level play more of a role in the continuity of SURs in Argentina while partisan structures are comparatively more consequential for SURs durability in Mexico.

The main findings presented in Giraudy's book, namely that there are different pathways to SURs continuity both between and within countries and that these pathways are determined by the capacity of presidents to co-opt local autocrats challenge existing research on subnational authoritarianism in several ways:

Giraudy contributes to and expands existing works that place institutions and intergovernmental relations at the center of their analysis by challenging previous research that locate the causes for SURs continuity at the subnational level, such as Edward Gibson's argument in "Boundary control" which says that local autocrats prevail if they manage to close the boundary to their authoritarian jurisdiction by preventing opposition forces access to outside allies and resources.¹ Giraudy's research suggests that SURs continuity is possible even if local autocrats fail to close boundaries to their jurisdictions because presidents may lack the powers to take advantage of such openings. There may therefore be different reasons *within the same country* for why SURs survive, a possibility that previous studies such as Gibson's do not consider.

However, Giraudy argument is mainly aimed against scholars who see subnational authoritarianism as a product of local conditions. Following Edward Gibson's institution-centric theory of subnational authoritarianism, she argues that SURs are decisively nonlocal in origins and the result of complex processes between different institutional layers. Giraudy takes issue with claims made in previous research that "SUR continuity is determined by geographic location, cultural heritage, and levels of socioeconomic development" (p. 11). SURs are spread across the territories of Argentina and Mexico and are also by no means confined to destitute areas where patronage structures are endemic. While non-patrimonial structures make it almost impossible for local autocrats to centralize authority and subsequently to cordon off their jurisdiction from outside attacks, such SURs continue to exist if presidents lack the power to co-opt them.

It is with regard to her book's main critique of scholarship which emphasizes the importance of *conditions intrinsic to authoritarian enclaves* for SURs continuity that Giraudy's argument is most problematic. While SURs reproduction from above may indeed be the result of

a combination of institutional conditions found at different administrative layers, it is difficult to see why cases of SURs self-reproduction should not depend on factors exogenous to institutions. Giraudy never clearly explains how relatively autonomous local autocrats establish party cohesion and generate mass support. As Angelo Panebianco (1988, 20) showed, party internal power dynamics are “strictly conditioned by the relations that the party establishes in the genetic phases and after by its interactions with other organizations and societal institutions.” For instance, the class in which a party is rooted may determine party internal dynamics for decades. Working class parties are more likely to develop strong vertical structures under the control of a national party leadership than middle class parties, Panebianco showed. Consequently, working class parties not only enjoy higher party discipline but are internal power structures are also often tilted in favor of national party leaders. The point is that socio-economic differences between and within countries may shape power dynamics both between and within parties and therefore eventually the capacity of relatively autonomous local autocrats to resist attacks from above. Characteristics intrinsic to localities may also shape the ability of local autocrats to elicit mass support. While SURs exist in jurisdictions with patrimonial and non-patrimonial structures in both Argentina and Mexico, patrimonial structures increase the propensity of local autocrats to neutralize presidential attacks and engage in SUR self-reproduction if presidential powers are weak, Giraudy argued above. Since socio-economic characteristics increase the probability that patrimonial structures exist, the logic conclusion is that external factors must shape local autocrats capacity of SUR self-reproduction. Finally, Giraudy’s argument that autocrats that are able to elicit mass support are more likely to neutralize presidential attempts to oust them from power also contradicts her claim that the roots of SURs continuity have all to do with institutional context, not with factors intrinsic to localities. “To elicit political support from the masses, subnational autocrats must implement policies and programs that are popular among voters...It does not matter whether SUR incumbents distribute public goods programmatically among the local population or whether they dispense clientelistic handouts. What is relevant is that incumbents in SURs are forced to deliver goods so as to give citizens a vested interest in the perpetuation of the regime.” (p. 31). However, “the masses” are not a homogenous group but consist of different classes with different interests, which has important consequences for the propensity of local politicians to elicit mass support as a new book on Argentine local politics by Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro shows.

The starting point of Weitz-Shapiro’s *Curbing Clientelism in Argentina: Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy* are, again, variances in undemocratic practices in Argentina’s local politics. However, unlike Giraudy who is interested in explaining regime continuity, Weitz-Shapiro wants to understand under what conditions local strongmen embark upon more democratic forms of politics. Focusing on clientelism, one of many undemocratic practices in Argentine local politics, she argues that engaging in such practices may not always be beneficial for politicians. In jurisdictions in which political competition is high *and* where there is a sizeable middle class, engaging in clientelism will have “audience costs” that outweigh the benefits to engage in such practices.

Weitz-Shapiro argues that middle-class voters condemn clientelism because they see it as an indicator for the poor quality of government service delivery more broadly. Service delivery motivated by clientelism may not only distort the welfare of this group but clientelism also usually requires politicians to spend most of their time in personal interactions with voters rather

than spending their time on public policy programs. The opportunity costs this personalization of politics creates for middle class voters is the reason for why they reject clientelism. In addition, middle-class voters may reject clientelism on moral grounds. Overall, Weitz-Shapiro's assumption is that middle-class voters have fewer incentives to support clientelism and that they will use elections to punish politicians engaging in such practices.

The findings presented by Weitz-Shapiro suggest that Schumpeterian views of democracy, which claim that increasing competition will curb clientelism, are at best incomplete. Intense competition among electoral candidates alone is insufficient to reduce the individualized exchange of goods for political support. In fact, if poor voters comprise the majority of the local electorate, an intensification of political competition may actually increase clientelist practices. Likewise, the argument put forward by Weitz-Shapiro also challenges modernization theory's main claim that the more well to do a nation, the greater the chances it will sustain a democracy. If politicians are relatively insulated from the electorate due to a lack of electoral competition, middle class voters won't be able to exert pressure on politicians to opt out of clientelism. In short, a growing middle class steers politicians in more democratic direction only *in combination* with political competition.

To explain why the reliance on clientelistic practices by politicians varies across Argentina's municipalities, Weitz-Shapiro examines the country's largest Food Security Policy, the Programa Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria (PNSA), which distributes food boxes to destitute citizens. Based on an original survey about such practices conducted in 125 municipalities, Weitz-Shapiro finds that citizen-politician engagement varies across Argentina because "politicians' decision about whether to use clientelism reflect the practices' relative electoral costs and incumbents' perceived security in office at a given point in time" (p. 107).

Weitz-Shapiro's book is an important contribution to the study of subnational politics because the *potential costs clientelism may have for politicians* are rarely analyzed. Most studies on local politics focus on the benefits such practices yield for politicians. More important, her findings challenge theories which say that institutional characteristics determine clientelist practices. Argentina's federal system does not allow for "substantial subnational institutional experimentation" (p. 15), yet, despite this relative institutional homogeneity, levels of clientelism vary across the country. Likewise, Weitz-Shapiro also argues against theories put forward by neoliberal scholars that have linked the prevalence of clientelism to the size of the state in the (local) economy. Her data do not reveal any link between control of the local economy by the state and the prevalence of clientelistic practices. Finally, Weitz-Shapiro also criticizes neo-Tocquevillian perspectives that see political accountability as a function of "strong" civil society engagement in politics. Based on her empirical data, the author argues that the presence of strong horizontal links in society without political competition among politicians is unlikely to lead towards more accountability.

However, while Weitz-Shapiro shows that electoral support in competitive political systems depends on social structure and that not all voters have the same incentives to support local autocrats, thereby exposing the simplistic understanding of "mass support" put forward in Giraudy's argument on SURs self-reproduction, it would have been interesting to hear more about what factors determine levels of political competition in Argentine municipalities. While

Weitz-Shapiro goes to great length to show that clientelism does not influence levels of political competition (but rather, competition in combination with relatively affluent voters influences clientelism), she does not put forward any argument as to what determines competition in the first place. Arguably, the competition between politicians or the absence thereof, has its roots in structural factors including local economic conditions and the opportunities they present to local elites for accumulating and monopolizing resources.ⁱⁱ Likewise, structural conditions may shape the independence of the electorate vis-à-vis politicians and therefore their willingness to punish them at the ballot box. Most important, Weitz-Shapiro's main premise, namely that middle-class voters reject clientelistic practices for moral and economic reasons, sits oddly with existing works that showed that it is not so much *the presence* of middle class voters that matters but *their position* vis-à-vis the government and political elites that determines whether they push for democracy or not. For instance, Weitz-Shapiro does not discuss Barrington Moore's classic *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* that showed how in many countries different modes of development created middle classes that depend on the state and became authoritarian deadweights rather than a bulwark for democracy as a consequence.ⁱⁱⁱ Likewise, socio-economic development may not only influence the position of middle class voters vis-à-vis the state but also shape the relationship of less affluent voters to the state. The "economic autonomy" of voters, poor or rich, determines whether politicians have anything to gain politically from engaging in clientelism and therefore whether they engage in such practices in the first place, as recent studies have shown.^{iv}

Even if one were to disregard such studies that emphasize the importance of structural factors in creating different electorates and eventually the propensity of different electorates to shun or engage in clientelistic practices, Weitz-Shapiro's theory takes the composition of the local electorate as a given. Numerous studies in recent years have shown, however, that clientelism in itself shapes the composition of the electorate. The Curley-effect in Boston, where four-times mayor James Michael Curley actively shaped the electorate in his favor by channeling resources to poor Irish voters and thereby triggering an exodus of richer citizens from the city is only the most infamous example.^v

Overall, institution-centric theories of local authoritarianism ought to develop a more sophisticated concept of "local conditions", especially if they want to rule them out as explanatory factors. While absolute levels of poverty or "local cultures" (however defined) may indeed fail to explain the variance in SURs continuity both between and within countries, class formation and the political dynamics that ensue from it ought to at least complement institutional approaches to the study of SURs. While studies such as Weitz-Shapiro's book are a step in the right direction, they too could make a better use of the rich literature on how structural conditions exogenous to local institutions shape local political machines and the clientelistic practices on which their survival depends.

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ⁱ Gibson's book was reviewed by Michael Buehler in *Publius* (Spring 2014) 44 (2).

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Hale 2003 on how the ethnic and economic legacies of the Soviet Union shaped possibilities for machine politics in Russia's regions after 1991.

ⁱⁱⁱ Weitz-Shapiro mentions Barrington Moore in a single footnote on p. 4 and places him in the same category with modernization theorists such as Seymour Martin Lipset.

^{iv} McMann 2006.

^v See Glaeser and Shleifer 2005, for an analysis of the Curley effect.