

BOOK REVIEW

Palmer-Rubin, Brian. (2022). *Evading the Patronage Trap. Interest Representation in Mexico*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Illustrations, bibliography, index, appendices, 323 pp.; hardcover US\$90.00, paperback US\$42.95, read online with open access
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Why do contemporary Latin American democracies have had such a hard time to reduce socioeconomic inequalities? Palmer-Rubin argues that this failure is rooted in biased systems of interest representation in which the demands of economic elites predominate while the demands of non-elite producers are typically inchoate and ignored. This “biased pluralism” is the result of a *convergence* on patronage-based linkages between interest organizations and parties’ preferences, whereby institutionalizing is a “patronage trap.” That is, a vicious cycle by which interest organizations specialize as brokers for accessing discretionary state benefits for their members and become unable to engage in programmatic representation.

The author contends that the models of representation adopted (programmatic and patronage) are explained by the types of relationships that interest organizations form *downwardly* (with their members) and *upwardly* (with political parties). A three-step theoretical model of path dependent representation models of economic interests is developed. First, organizations adopt a mode of demand-making, privileging programmatic or patronage demands. Second, parties select strategies for incorporating (core and non-core) interest organizations in either programmatic or patronage policymaking, and do so conditioned by their founding trajectories and the degree of electoral competition faced (by ruling parties). Third, based on the interaction of their preferences, parties and organizations enter into linkages, producing either programmatic or patronage-based representation. Hence, programmatic representation of economic interests can only result as a stable outcome in those cases in which the demands of interest organizations and the incorporation strategies of political parties *converge* on the programmatic side.

Since the first step of this complex causal chain results determinant, what explains why non-elite interest organizations often fail to attain programmatic representation? In contrast to most studies of patronage/clientelism, Palmer-Rubin engages the demand side of interest representation by emphasizing the *organizational* dynamics that cause interest organizations to specialize in patronage demand-making and, thus, are ill-equipped to making programmatic demands. Going back to basic tenets of collective action theory, Palmer-Rubin contends that the organization’s model for achieving organizational capacity—needed to sustain an active membership—shapes demand-making. Besides funding their activities, organizations have to offer selective incentives to recruit/retain members and provide them individual incentives to participate. Organizations can produce these individual benefits internally (e.g., providing valuable services), or obtain them from external resources. Only when an organization is able to solve this basic organizational problem *internally*, generating their own selective benefits, it may turn its full attention to other goals, such as influencing programmatic policies. When organizational capacity is, in contrast, externally provided, the organization becomes dependent on brokerage, institutionalizing organizational traits (heterogenous membership and oligarchic leadership) that will impede it to pursue programmatic demand-making.

To test his theory, the author designs a comparative subnational research design in Mexico, analyzing variation across three Mexican states (Estado de México, Jalisco, Michoacán), two

economic sectors (small-scale agriculture and small business), individual organizations within each sector, and Mexico's three major ruling parties (PRI, PAN, PRD), while controlling for similar structural/institutional factors. Palmer-Rubin empirical research is just impressive. He studies through participant observation the actions of 18 organizations that constitute the three largest organizations in each of the two sectors in each of the three states selected. As part of his qualitative field study, he also conducted over 100 interviews, with organizational leaders, party personnel, and state officials. This impressive amount of qualitative information is complemented with an analysis of quantitative data from an original survey of organizations from the two sectors launched in 2012 and data on small-business subsidies. Moreover, this rich information is analyzed in a very systematic and rigorous way in five empirical chapters documenting organizational capacity across the organizations analyzed (Chapter 3), analyzing the demand-making strategies pursued by peasant organizations (Chapter 4) and small-business associations (Chapter 5), as well as parties' incorporation strategies of peasant organizations (Chapter 6) and of small-business associations (Chapter 7) and how they change over time.

Through these empirical chapters, Palmer-Rubin demonstrates that convergence on programmatic representation in Mexico is typical for the middle-class small-business associations and right-wing party PAN, and much rarer for low-class peasants organizations and left-wing PDR. However, the analysis also shows that significant empirical variation does exist in models of representation in Mexico. Certain organizations representing the rural poor can evade the "patronage trap" (e.g., ANEC), while organizations representing middle-class small-businesses of can fall prey to it (e.g., CAREINTRA). Hence, class origins of organizational members matters; it is not a sufficient explanation for the outcomes observed. The book further provides convincing qualitative and quantitative evidence showing that the theory proposed explains better variation (across sectors, states, within organizations of the same sector) as well as changes over time and final outcomes.

The book makes important contributions to the study of Latin American politics. First, theoretical ones. The author offers a historical-institutionalist theory, contextually grounded, to explain a complex political phenomenon at the heart of the region's persisting inequality. While following an older tradition, the theory offers a "refreshing" alternative to limited mainstream views of the political science literature on clientelism/patronage and parties that, centered on the supply-side of distributive politics only, portray clients as free-floating passive agents. Joining more recent contributions, Palmer-Rubins sheds light on the demand side of patronage/clientelism. Furthermore, he does so from a new theoretical angle, providing an organizational-level explanation for explaining patronage representation, thus reminding us that clients are embedded within a broader organizational layer that should be taken into account and studied on its own.

Second, the book provides field-intensive and rigorous research on a crucial topic for an unequal region, insufficiently studied in recent years. Palmer-Rubin engages in a very detailed, systematic, and informative analysis of subnational politics in Mexico while testing his theory. Moreover, Palmer-Rubin takes seriously existent research produced in Latin America, building on and dialoguing with it (e.g. 177–79). This constitutes a desirable and necessary research practice for comparativists, increasingly forgotten in research conducted from the North.

Finally, as any exemplar book, reading Palmer-Rubin's work not only teaches one a lot on the substantive topic (interest representation) and the case (subnational Mexican politics), but also raises interesting questions for the comparative study of the topic in the region. In particular, one is left wondering about the scope conditions for the generalizability of the argument outside Mexico. In what follows, I present three factors that, I believe, deserve greater discussion for future assessments. First, whether federalism could be a relevant scope condition not discussed. The power of state-level ministries to design, finance, and discretionally implement productive/economic policies, and not only parties' strategies, could condition the extent to which economic interest organizations can engage in programmatic/patronage representation at the subnational level. In this regard, it is interesting how while studying the case of Chile (a unitary country) for the conclusion,

the author did not find evidence of distributive policies oriented to provide particularistic benefits or organizational funding for business organizations. In fact, the possibility of developing subnational modes of economic interests representation in unitary countries might be related to the degree or particular form that fiscal and administrative decentralization (productive/economic development competences) take. Considering that this is a path dependent explanation, the way decentralization changes take place could affect the way party-organization linkages form as well as distinct patterns of economic interests representation develop across countries.

A second question relates to the role of parties and characteristics of the party system. Since the theory hinges on medium-term consequences of partisan strategies of interest organizations' incorporation and party-organization linkages, what happens in contexts of weak parties or party volatility? Probably, organic programmatic linkages would be precluded, as the author expects (p. 259). But maybe, when parties are weak, more than developing patronage linkages and (a more lasting) patronage representation, the result may be weaker, more unstable patronage exchanges combined with forms of corruption, as I have proposed based on my previous research on electoral clientelism in Peru (Muñoz 2019). Like the author suggests, contexts with weak parties reduce the threat of partisan co-optation that would convert these organizations into clientelist machines. Thus, organizations may engage in particularistic exchanges, brokering access to club goods (instead of individual benefits) for their members. Short-term oriented politicians, in turn, would combine these targeted particularistic exchanges of club goods (projects) with private corruption. Overall, lacking constant state subsidy, interest organizations in general would compete for scarce funds available and be more vulnerable to extinction.

Third, when parties are weak it may be more relevant to theorize the role of civil servants in the model. For instance, the existence of autonomous technocracies that counterbalance partisan discretionality in some sectors, may be a factor explaining the prevalence of fewer (or less organized forms of) patronage. For instance, anecdotic evidence from Peru suggests that technical-oriented national-level ministries design and implement policies targeted to economic sectors (such as PROCOMPITE, competitive funds to co-finance business plans of organized economic agents in areas where private investment is insufficient) in a less politically discretionary and patronage-oriented fashion than the Mexican case suggests.

Finally, a void identified for theorizing about economic interest representation is the role played by informal sector workers/producers. The author only briefly mentions that it is a sector that struggles to organize and perhaps enjoys even less representation than the peasants (p. 48). And the regulation of informal commerce is mentioned afterwards in an empirical chapter as a crucial governance issue that affects the local business communities in Mexico and is a sector related with the PRI (pp. 226–30). However, despite Mexico being a country with a considerably large informal sector in the region, nothing else is said about how their economic interests are represented or not and why.

I learned a great deal about Mexican politics from reading this excellent book and found myself pondering several questions for my own research. I am confident that others will have similar inquiries, so I highly recommend adding it to your “must-read” list.

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